

A HYBRID APPROACH TO REFLECTION:  
AN INVESTIGATION OF BLOGS AND IN-PERSON MEETINGS USED TO  
SUPPORT PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

BY

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THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigated the implementation of a hybrid collaborative reflection model that used a blog and in-person meetings for a teacher assistant (TA) training program at the Intensive English Program (IEP) associated with a Midwestern university. The IEP's Director added the collaborative reflection experience to extend the TA training program into a semester-long support system. To gain insights on the effectiveness of the reflection experience, the researcher focused on three main themes: reflective teaching practices, using technology for reflection, and learning communities. The participants included five TAs who were in their first semester of teaching at the IEP and the IEP's Director. For this ethnographic study, data collection was conducted in the semester the training occurred and in the subsequent semester. Data included field observations, surveys, interviews, blog content, and meeting transcriptions. The findings showed mostly positive perceptions of the collaborative reflection and the related development of a learning community. This study suggested that the collaborative reflection experience can be improved by clarifying the concept and benefits of reflection and training TAs on the technology used for reflection. Levels of engagement varied across the participants, but the TAs felt the four reflection topics added value to the TA training process.

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## **CHAPTER 1: PURPOSE**

Addressing teachers' training needs is no easy feat given the complexity of the teaching profession. The profession's dynamic nature (Freeman, 2002; Richards & Lockhart, 1994) requires teachers to consider and integrate countless factors into their everyday decisions both in and out of the classroom. As a subspecialty, language teaching has an additional challenge of second language acquisition (SLA), which in itself is complicated (Freeman, 1989). Language teacher education theories and practices have advanced over time in response to the evolution of SLA research and teacher education research. Despite numerous shifts in theory and practice for language teacher education, there is still a need for further research on effective teacher training methods. Research on these methods varies greatly, but one consistent focus area is reflection and its influence on teacher training. Freeman (2002) said reflection must be a priority in language teacher education as it facilitates a teacher's understandings of his/her experiences. He argued that reflection promotes teachers' habits of self-analysis and holistic thinking, while also equipping teachers with the ability to communicate about their experiences. Ultimately, the application of reflective thoughts can improve teachers' practices and advance the efficacy of their teaching.

The opportunities for teacher trainees to communicate about their experiences are largely context dependent. Some institutes may not have sufficient resources or knowledgeable teacher educators who can facilitate effective reflection. Freeman (2002) suggested that teacher educators are researching "how schools as sociocultural environments mediate and transform what and how teachers learn" (p. 12). Increasingly, there are more opportunities for institutes and teacher educators to develop training based on Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural learning theory. Technology, in particular, has improved the possibility for such collaborative learning and

reflection to occur. There is still debate regarding the merits of technology for reflective practices. However, the functionality afforded by technology, such as asynchronous access or centralization of shared knowledge, is seen as desirable for teacher educators who are directing collaborative learning.

Ideally, collaborative learning among teachers brings its members together through a community of practice or learning community. These communities often have shared goals of enhancing teacher knowledge and skills and coalesce diverse members' perspectives. This collaboration offers the opportunity for members to broaden their exposure to new ideas and practices and enriches training experiences. Collaborative learning can influence the teachers' actions and decisions in the classroom and improve the outcomes for students' learning. The diverse perspectives that are shared within learning communities can include sharing of techniques, solutions to teaching problems, or general thoughts on higher-level social issues encountered across different educational contexts. Furthermore, interactions within learning communities often create camaraderie and offer emotional support, which can encourage teachers' more proactive engagement in long-term professional development.

As Freeman (2002) mentioned, schools offer the possibility for sociocultural learning, but more research is needed to understand what is learned and how it is learned. The purpose of this study was to explore the successes and challenges of a newly implemented TA training program at an IEP, which involved a component dedicated to collaborative reflection and community building. When developing this collaborative reflection component, the IEP's Director employed a hybrid approach of blogging and in-person meetings. This reflective component, partially driven through technology, was designed to enhance TAs' understanding of reflective practices, to create professional development opportunities, and to encourage the building of a learning

community. To investigate the perceptions of the collaborative reflection experience and its influence on the participants, the researcher conducted surveys and interviews with the TAs in training and the IEP Director. The data analyzed for this study included a variety of media types such as the reflection blog content, transcriptions of the in-person meetings, surveys, and interviews. All of this data offered insights that helped answer the following research questions:

- 1) What were the results of exposing TAs to reflective practices through the collaborative reflection model?
- 2) What were the advantages and disadvantages of a hybrid collaborative reflection model?
- 3) What were the TAs' perceptions about the formation of a learning community and how did this community influence them?

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Reflection is a concept that is widely encouraged for professional development purposes across a variety of fields or industries. Research on reflection is usually motivated by goals of improving individuals' skills, behaviors, productivity, processes, and/or efficacy in their roles. Without exception, reflection is pervasive in the field of education, which is demonstrated through an overwhelming quantity of literature and research on the concept. Teacher educators have been integrating additional reflective practices in their pre-service and in-service programs (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Joyce & Showers, 1995; Krutka, Bergman, Flores, Mason, & Jack, 2014), but expert on novice teacher reflection, Thomas Farrell (2012) calls for an amplification of reflective practices. Overall, the purposes, scales of analysis, and contexts of this research on reflection in education are too diverse to make an all-encompassing definition of reflection and do justice to the full scope of the findings. Instead, before moving forward with this study's research, this chapter aims to provide a foundation of understanding on studies regarding collaborative reflection or reflective practices done with more than one person. The literature review begins with an exploration of reflective practices as a concept and continues by correlating the practices to professional development. Next, definitions of reflective practices are expanded upon with descriptions of how technology can promote collaborative reflection. The final part of the review discusses how learning communities are formed and how reflection contributes to the formation of such communities.

The first section on reflection explores the following key areas: 1) defining reflective practices, 2) implementation of reflective teaching practices, and 3) reflection and professional development. In the second section, the review focuses on technology used for reflection and is



divided into the areas of: 1) unique characteristics of technology-based reflection, 2) logistics of utilizing technology for reflection, 3) relationships between technology and face-to-face interactions. The literature review culminates with a section focusing on learning communities in the key areas of: 1) building a learning community and 2) peer influence within a learning community.

## **2.1 Reflective teaching practices**

### *2.1.1 Defining reflective practices*

Defining reflective teaching practices can be quite challenging given the practices are indeed multi-faceted and dynamic. The origin of reflection dates back to 1933 when Dewey explained reflection and its role in education. Dewey's (1933) description of reflection was "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9). A person might interpret that as taking one's analysis of approaches within a given context and applying that analysis to the adaptations or improvements of the approaches. Reflective teaching practices have diverse manifestations that vary based on the educational contexts in which they take place. However, there does seem to be a possible point of agreement across conceptual definitions of critical reflection: use of metacognition to analyze situations or information with the ultimate goal of adapting and/or improving future approaches or actions (Bartlett, 1990; Dewey, 1933, Krutka et al., 2014). On a larger scale, these analyses could build up to what Farrell (2012) described as a teacher's problem-solving framework, which is flexible to the contexts in which the teacher works.

The variability of contexts and type of reflective practices can influence the overall quality of reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Hatton and Smith reiterate that the fluidity of the

definition of reflection affects these qualities. Such inconsistencies of reflection's definition subsequently call into question the research and methodology used to measure reflection. For the purpose of this study, the researchers provides a working definition of a reflective teaching practice to simplify its analysis within the context of the study: a purposeful evaluation of oneself and one's methods or techniques with the goal of developing a problem-solving framework to identify possible improvements for future teaching decisions within one's specific context.

Reflective teaching practices may begin at an individual level, but reflecting with others can also provide unique professional development opportunities. Several researchers who investigated reflective teaching practices (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Chen, 2012; Farrell, 2012; Hagan, 2007; Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Krutka et al., 2014; Levin, 2000; Nishino, 2012; Preece, 2004; Reich et al., 2011) claimed reflection can be enhanced through the sociocultural learning afforded by collaborative platforms or programs. These collaborative platforms or programs can influence the formation of professional learning communities (Levin, 2000; Nicholson & Bond, 2003; Preece, 2004; Reich et al., 2011) as well as the motivation for participating in reflection. Yet, defining the most effective elements of reflective infrastructure or even the value of implementing reflective tasks are still under debate. In regards to the TA training component investigated in this study, one key goal of the component was to raise awareness about reflective practices and encourage the TAs to utilize them. Specifically, this study examined how exposure to reflective practices influenced the program participants.

Despite possible controversy in implementing reflection, (often determined to be a personal endeavor) in a collaborative effort, Gore (1987) identifies two potential benefits of teachers sharing experiences: "First, [teachers] may come to value their practical

knowledge...and [second]...is strong collegiality” (p. 73). When teachers have a platform to which they can contribute their own practical knowledge, it often results in stronger engagement with fellow colleagues. A mixed-method study by Krutka et al. (2014) confirmed the beneficial development of collegiality through the reflective tool, Edmodo. They purposely explored Edmodo for its social networking features such as microblogging and collaborative discussion. Participants of the study were 77 middle or secondary pre-service teachers of various subjects near the end of their teacher preparation program (p. 86). Krutka et al. shared the pre-service teachers’ feelings about a “collective purpose with their peers,” which added to their willingness to participate. The pre-service teachers even said those interactions influenced their pedagogical approaches (p. 90). Overall, the participants perceived that collaborative learning occurred through the use of Edmodo and felt the reflective processes influenced their professional growth.

Moreover, there was evidence (see Farrell, 2012; Richards & Lockhart, 1994) that reflective practices establish a toolkit for teachers to use and adapt to their immediate needs. Farrell (2012) believed that reflective practices aid teachers as they develop their own problem-solving frameworks. These frameworks can be applied within their respective contexts. Farrell also called for additional support of novice teachers through integration of reflective practices into teacher education coursework. He even proposed “...a supplementary course that is focused exclusively on exploring the first years of teaching through reflective practice” (p. 440). Farrell argued that such coursework could provide novice teachers with a model of reflective practices. Students would learn how to apply the reflective practices in their coursework and beyond; practicing during coursework could help them establish a foundation which they can expand upon in their future teaching. Richards and Lockhart (1994) also discussed that as teachers increase their frequency of critical reflection, it “enables the teachers to augment their confidence

in trying different options and assessing their effects on teaching” (p. 4). The aforementioned research suggests that collaborative learning (Bartlett, 1990; Krutka et al., 2014) and a foundation of reflective practices (Farrell, 2012; Richards & Lockhart, 1994) can boost teachers’ confidence and encourage experimentation in the classroom. When a teacher experiments in the classroom, they can discover whether or not methods are effective, which ultimately enriches the learning processes of their students.

For further understanding about reflection and the possible implications, one may need detailed examples of “reflective activities.” Even though those activities can be rather subjective, Hatton and Smith (1995) organized reflective practices into the categories of action research projects, case studies, microteaching and practicum experiences, and structure curriculum tasks (p. 36). Additionally, Richards and Lockhart (1994) suggested the following reflective activities: teaching journals, lesson reports, surveys and questionnaires, audio and video recordings, observation, and action research. More recently, teacher educators are also integrating more technology-based reflection into their training programs. Examples of technology-based reflective activities include two-way email journals (Levin, 2000), discussion boards (Levin, 2000; Nicholson & Bond, 2003), telecollaboration (Chen, 2012), blogs (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Killeavy & Moloney, 2010), or online communities (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Germain-Rutherford, 2015; Hur & Brush, 2009; Krutka et al., 2014; Preece, 2004; Reich, Levinson, & Johnston, 2011; Schlager, Fusco, Schank, & Dwyer, 2009), all of which can facilitate reflective discussions. When discussing language teacher development, Farrell (2012) offered his ideas of exploring teacher beliefs and practices through case studies. Wright (2010) concurred that case studies could be valuable in language teacher education. The case studies, according to Wright, can enrich teaching and observation opportunities, journaling, and group

discussions. However, Wright also acknowledged activities such as observations and group discussions are often already built into teaching practicum courses (p. 273). The inclusion of these activities in a practicum course is positive in the sense they are already addressed, but it may discourage teacher trainee participation if teacher educators do not put forth additional effort to offer supplemental reflective activities.

While a plethora of reflective activities and tools exist, one common activity is reflective journaling. Making reflection available in a tangible form of writing establishes a well-informed foundation for a “discovery process” (Richards & Lockhart, 1994, p. 7). Borg (2006) and Vygotsky (1987) explained that writing forces a more concrete expression of one’s thoughts, which is beneficial as teachers ideally transform their analyses into action in pursuit of personal and professional development. Expanding upon this idea, Arshavskaya and Whitney (2014) discussed how reflective writing establishes “a space...in which teachers can reflect on their teaching beliefs and practices, re-frame their current understandings or teaching, and search for alternative ways of engaging in every day teaching practices” (p. 732). These conceptualizations of reflective writing provide support for reflective journaling as a professional development opportunity for teachers, novice and experienced alike.

Additional benefits of reflective writing exist in the greater professional community through collaborative reflection. Porter et al. (1990) pointed out reflective journaling propels pre-service teachers to connect their reflections to theories and experiences from their coursework. Once those individual pre-service teachers make those connections, Porter et al. (1990) and Bartlett (1990) suggested the logical next step is to engage with fellow teachers and collaboratively reflecting. Alterio (2004) studied collaborative reflection journaling among a group of professionals from four different fields. According to Alterio, “when we use reflective

processes to learn with and from others, we create opportunities to enhance our interpersonal relationships and gain multiple perspectives” (p. 322). Relationship building and exposure to diverse viewpoints are often characteristics of collaborative learning communities (Preece, 2004). Some research has connected collaborative reflection to co-learning models (i.e. Chen, 2012) or Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of learning (see Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Germain-Rutherford, 2015; Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Levin, 2000) believing that collaborative reflection should involve mixtures of experienced and non-experienced teachers’ thoughts and insights. Such a mixture of teachers’ experience levels works off Vygotsky’s idea about the zone of proximal development (ZPD): novice learning can be advanced when individuals with more experience provide some guidance in the learning environment. Experienced individuals can also benefit from the “fresh eyes” of novices.

Interviews with Japanese EFL teachers from Nishino’s (2012) study on communities of practice revealed the teachers’ appreciation of reflecting with colleagues with diverse levels of experiences and backgrounds. Variations of collaborative reflection can include in-person teacher development discussion groups (Farrell, 1999; Nishino, 2012), collaborative reflection journals (Richards & Lockhart, 1994), email journals (Levin, 2000), dialogic blogs (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014), online professional networks (Hampel & Stickler, 2015), or group discussion boards (Ernest & Hopkins, 2006; Hagan, 2007; Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Hur & Brush, 2009; Killeavy & Moloney, 2010; Levin, 2000; Nicholson & Bond, 2003; Reich et al., 2011). While much of this current study investigates reflection primarily occurring in electronic formats, another focus is how a hybrid model of dialogic blogs and in-person meetings can encourage a collaborative community of reflection.

### *2.1.2 Implementation of reflective teaching practices*

After outlining aspects of reflection, one should consider the resources needed to implement reflective teaching practices and the effects on both facilitators and the reflective practitioners. For the purposes of this review, resources are inclusive of tangible aspects of daily functions as well the intangible. The tangible aspects are usually identified as technology, meeting spaces, etc. Examples of intangible resources, however, include the effort put forth to develop infrastructure for reflective activities, and the time or motivation used for reflection. The intangible resources are an important focus area for this discussion. Establishing reflective infrastructure often requires teacher educators not only to have knowledge about teaching concepts, but also to have the practical skills to conduct effective training for teacher trainees. Using technology can be overwhelming in some educational training contexts, especially for administrators who are less familiar with technology and fear the learning curve that is often associated with it. In terms of the intangible resources, an administrator's organizational acumen and curricula design can influence the overall efficacy of reflection. The knowledge needed to appropriately scaffold the training materials is one such manifestation of an administrators' curricular design. Similar to the scaffolding students need from a teacher in a classroom, teacher trainees may also need scaffolding to cultivate a productive learning environment (Bailey & Willett, 2004). On the other hand, Hobbs (2007) pointed out that too much focus on reflection for graded coursework can be risky; teacher trainees can perceive graded work as antithetical to the concept of reflection for personal, professional growth. Clear communication about the purpose and value of reflection (Krutka et al., 2014) are vital components of training materials, requiring diligence from facilitators (Berg, 1998). Krutka et al. (2014) found that for the first part of the semester, their participants did not go beyond descriptions of events from their practicum classrooms. Because Krutka et al. wanted the participants to engage in meaningful reflection,

Krutka et al. had to intervene in the process and clarify (again) their expectations for quality reflection. This was something they planned to emphasize more at the beginning of their future collaborative reflection cycles. Explanations of reflection's purpose and value could be incorporated into the scaffolding and provide justification for the reflective activities.

The need for scaffolding during reflective experiences stems from the limited connections trainees tend to make between theory and application in the classroom setting (see Chen, 2012; Farrell, 2012; Krutka et al., 2014; Maarof, 2007; Richards, 1998). These researchers remind teacher educators not to expect pre-service teachers to intuitively link theory to practice automatically. This suggested that when the facilitators scaffold for the reflective activities, the efficacy of the reflection will improve among novice teachers. Maarof (2007) advised teacher educators to consider that teacher trainees do not have the class experience to draw upon for their reflection; without scaffolding, the trainees could find themselves at a disadvantage when they are expected to reflect. This can cause frustration and decrease buy-in for the reflective process. To incorporate more authentic experiences, Edens (2000) suggested the use of real world examples for reflection. The case studies recommended by Farrell (2012) and Wright (2010) could provide proxy real world classroom experience for trainees in the event the practical experiences are not feasible for a teacher education program. However, the scaffolding would still be crucial to effective reflection and possibly better as a supplement to in-person observations or journaling (Wright, 2010).

Motivation is a resource that affects both teacher educators and those who are reflecting, thus potentially adding complications to teacher training programs. While scaffolding can be beneficial, there is also the risk that it overreaches in some cases, thus depriving teacher trainees of genuine professional exploration and development. Hobbs (2007) investigated 12 course



participants' perceptions of required reflection as an assessment component of a short-term TESOL certification course. Hobbs' ethnographic study involved her participation in the course, placing her amidst the discussions and behaviors surrounding the reflection process. To gain insight beyond the first-person point of view, Hobbs also interviewed 12 course participants and examined their teaching reflection journals. Ultimately, Hobbs found participants disliked the forced reflection and she concluded, "it seems only natural to feel resentment towards a stipulation that asks one to be open and honest about one's beliefs whilst implying that a certain response is preferable" (p. 413). Though this could be subjective on the part of Hobbs, she did suggest using group discussions or asking those reflecting to choose their own format to promote additional responses and possibly further positive engagement (p. 415). As with many administrative design decisions, finding an appropriate balance of infrastructure and freedom can be tricky, but it is important for effective training.

Careful consideration of the details is helpful as teacher educators communicate the goals of reflective activities. The researchers of the Krutka et al. (2014) study are teacher educators who had previously implemented reflective assignments in their own teacher training courses. Personal observations about their teaching experiences informed Krutka et al.'s design of their study on collaborative reflection with Edmodo. Their experiences made them realize the importance of over-guiding as facilitators. During their 2014 study, Krutka et al. noted that throughout the study, they struggled to find an equilibrium of teacher facilitation and openness for participants to decide how they contributed to the reflection; they did not want to force participants' conversations. In counteracting this potentially forced participation, Krutka et al. advocated for facilitators to be clear about the purpose and target goals of a reflective activity. Krutka et al. believed thoughtful clarification of such expectations could mitigate the forced

participation but still provide enough guidance to create productive reflective interactions.

Indeed, the theme of clear expectations can be found across the existing literature on collaborative reflection. Germain-Rutherford (2015) shared insights regarding implementation based on a study of groups that used online collaboration for professional development. According to Germain-Rutherford (2015), clear expectations would ideally contribute to pre-service teachers' perceived value of the reflection. Within the reflective community, however, beyond infrastructure for the reflective activities, there must be relationship building opportunities (Wenger et al., 2002). Wenger et al., who wrote a guide for developing communities of practice, argued implementing this careful design of a reflective community promotes participants' perceptions that the reflective activities are valuable. With perceived value of professional interactions and knowledge sharing, there should be increased engagement.

Finally, time and motivation are other resources for teacher educators to consider when implementing reflective tasks or communities. Raywid (1993) and Reich et al. (2011) concurred that much time is needed for reflection as it must be repeated over time to achieve long-term professional growth. Perceived value may not be enough to outweigh the drawbacks of intense time requirements for reflection. Teacher trainees can view the time commitments to reflection as too demanding (Alterio, 2004; Hobbs, 2007; Reich et al., 2011), which potentially forces conversations (Krutka et al., 2014) or demotivates participation altogether (Hobbs, 2007). Reich et al. (2011) researched reflective discussions of 22 pre-service teachers who were members of a social networking site for social studies teachers across the United States (U.S.). While the participants of Reich et al.'s study recognized the importance and value of collaborative reflection, they experienced challenges in finding time to reflect (p. 382). Reich et al. discovered reflective community members may have found time to meet, but the time to enrich those

reflective conversations with theoretical readings became too impracticable. Facilitators of reflection are well-aware of reflection's demands on time as well. Farrell (2012) noted that creating realistic professional development materials or case studies takes dedication on the part of teacher educators as well as class time, both of which may seem unfeasible in educational environments that are often already resource limited (Raywid, 1993). Raywid (1993) outlined numerous cases where schools have creatively organized time to enable collaborative reflection or professional development in such resource-limited environments. As an example, groups of students can be scheduled to participate in service learning in exchange for class time, allowing those teachers to gather for shared reflection. Of course, efforts like this require large-scale cooperation and support from administration, which may be harder for some programs to achieve depending on the levels of bureaucracy.

Alongside limitations of time are the potential roadblocks created by a lack of motivation to reflect. Specifically, Hobbs (2007) declared that prompts used for reflection could discourage reflection when it is graded because students believe teacher educators will prefer specific answers or views. In this case, the intended intrinsic motivation to reflect is overridden by the extrinsic motivation of a good grade, thus decreasing motivation to engage in reflection for the benefits of individual professional growth. Krutka et al. (2014) noticed a different effect on motivation when prompts were pre-determined by the teachers. In their experience as teacher educators, Krutka et al. noted teacher trainees exerted the minimal effort when prompts or questions were provided by the teachers for the discussion forums. Krutka et al. also found the content trainees did contribute in these pre-determined prompts were focused on the quick responses expressing concerns about a topic rather than the targeted goal reflecting on issues and developing alternative solutions (p. 87). Sometimes, however, motivation may just be a

manifestation of teacher trainees' unawareness of their professional development needs. Brannan and Bleistein (2012), who studied novice ESL teachers' perspectives on social support networks, determined teacher educators should emphasize the benefits of collegial professional development and reflection. According to Brannan and Bleistein, once teacher trainees understand the potential benefits, theoretically they hold themselves accountable for participating in collegial support networks to collaboratively reflect and then improve teaching efficacy (p. 356). Overall, resources are often limited or strained and this demands teacher educators to be creative in their development and delivery of reflective programming.

### *2.1.3 Reflection and professional development*

One of the most desirable aspects of using reflection for professional development is utilizing it to make thoughtful change (Alterio, 2004) and improve practices (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014). Gelfuso and Dennis (2014) shared insights from their study of 13 pre-service teachers who were in a pilot teacher education program. To encourage beneficial habits for long-term professional development, the pilot program incorporated pre-service teachers' reflection on a video-recorded lesson. To expand on the reflection, the pre-service teachers then engaged in collaborative discussions with supervisors/mentors. The video-recording was the driver of the conversation. According to Gelfuso and Dennis's findings, supervisors/mentors often expect professional responses from pre-service teachers, but that is not always feasible. Gelfuso and Dennis noted pre-service teachers may not have the background knowledge to draw upon as they are reflecting, thus a "support structure" becomes a necessity to aid the reflection process. The researchers pointed to facilitation as a crucial component for pre-service teachers' successful reflection, supporting the idea that supervisors should model the behavior. Gelfuso and Dennis questioned whether conversational interaction among the supervisors and the pre-service

teachers was enough to influence their long-term professional development. Consequently, Gelfuso and Dennis recommended further research on the professional relationships established through such programs and the resulting influence on reflective practices. Because support infrastructure can be an influential force on teachers' reflective practices and professional development, the current study explored how the professional relationships developed and influenced reflection and professional development of graduate students in a teacher training program.

In Farrell's (2012) work directly addressing second language teachers' professional development, he recommended the use of narrative accounts of experiences in the classroom as a reflective tool. Narrative reflection has also been encouraged by language teacher education experts (e.g. Bailey, 1997; Farrell, 2012; Freeman, 1996). All three experts embrace the ideas that reflective narratives may seem too personal to share but ultimately sharing can lead to successful reflective conversations with colleagues. Arshavskaya and Whitney (2014) specifically focused their attention to narrative reflections from a practicum course in their study on teacher training. Their analysis of "dialogic blog entries" between a pre-service teacher and a supervisor shows the influence of such reflective conversation (p. 733). The pre-service teacher noticed how she genuinely considered how to apply discoveries from her reflection to her teaching. She said this application to her experiences was a result of her involvement with the dialogic blog. Arshavskaya and Whitney (2014) surmised the increased proactive engagement from the pre-service teacher and application of reflection served as evidence of the pre-service teacher's professional growth. Krutka et al. (2014) did not use a narrative approach, but their pre-service teachers felt they grew professionally through their experience on Edmodo. They liked the use of Edmodo for collaborative reflection. The pre-service teachers even credited part of

their overall professional growth to the experience with Edmodo. The current study analyzed how the dialogic blog component influenced the TAs in terms of their professional development.

Another possible benefit of using reflection exists when administrators use the results of reflective tasks to document professional development (Ernest & Hopkins, 2006) and/or to identify areas of teacher training that might need improvement (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014). Ernest and Hopkins (2006) studied training and development of teachers within an online learning community at a Spanish university; the specific audience of trainees included teachers who were learning how to teach their own courses online. As Ernest and Hopkins pointed out, an online community offers a centralized communication platform that can function as a tracking method for administrators who are looking at trainees' progress (p. 544). Arshavskaya and Whitney (2014) claim that a reflective activity (i.e. a collaborative reflection blog) can also create a record for administrators and facilitators to reference for insight on the topics teacher trainees do or do not understand. Yet, Arshavskaya and Whitney also remind facilitators to demonstrate how reflective journal writing can help trainees make connections between theory and practice. Such demonstrations create more contexts for trainees to use as inspiration. Additional details on the influence of facilitators are addressed later. Some researchers (see Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Ernest & Hopkins, 2006) validated the call for further research about the actual effects of teachers applying reflection to classroom practices and learners' experiences.

## **2.2 Technology used for reflection**

### *2.2.1 Unique characteristics of technology-based reflection*

Technology is an influence in today's society, and recently technology is establishing its place in teacher training programs. Teacher educators are implementing technology both for its

functionality in training and documentation of progress (see Chen, 2012; Ernest & Hopkins, 2006; Nicholson & Bond, 2003) as well as for the practical skills teachers can cultivate for their own practices to stay current with teaching trends (Gomez, Shrin, Griesdorn, & Finn, 2008; Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Krutka et al., 2014). Another important consideration for teacher educators is the idea that diverse knowledge and communication can be shared from multiple access points with immediacy enabled by computer-mediated communication (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Hagan, 2007; Nicholson & Bond, 2003; Nonis, Bronack, & Heaton, 2000; Reich et al., 2011). Related to reflective learning, technologically-based methods can range from blogs as digital reflection journals (Killeavy & Moloney, 2010) to discussion boards (Ernest & Hopkins, 2006; Hagan, 2007; Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Hur & Brush, 2009; Killeavy & Moloney, 2010; Levin, 2000; Nicholson & Bond, 2003; Reich et al., 2011). Yet, Schlager et al. (2009) noted little empirical evidence regarding the results of social networks for teachers that are enabled by technology. Schlager et al. suggested that because few analyses are available on a scale larger than a cohort of students, it is challenging to validate how reflection influences teachers' performance and their students' experiences. Thus, Schlager et al. demanded cooperation across the fields of education, engineering, and technology to overcome the limitations of the research models so the benefits of online networks can achieve maximum efficacy (p. 96). Most teacher educators may understand the advantages technology can offer. Yet, as Schlager et al. noted, finding reliable methods to measure effectiveness of such networks could add validity to the arguments in support of implementing that technology.

In the early 2000s, education research shifted as a result of the ways in which technology was shaping society. Levin (2000) conducted a study on reflective e-mail interactions, technology which is now considered commonplace. In the study, Levin analyzed 11

undergraduate pre-service teachers' exchanges of e-mail reflection journals with peers and teacher educators. Levin compared the e-mail interactions to reflective group collaboration within discussion boards on the learning management system, TopClass (p. 149), and she found deeper levels of reflection within the collaborative discussion boards.

Another use of technology for reflection is video recordings of teaching sessions. Gelfuso and Dennis (2014) studied the effectiveness of individuals' reflection on video recordings of their lessons as well as the culminating reflective discussions between pre-service teachers and their supervisors. While Gelfuso and Dennis ultimately determined further focused research could reveal additional insight regarding the influence of experienced supervisors have in similar contexts, they did acknowledge the importance of pairing the technology with facilitation and/or support structures to help pre-service teachers with reflection. These highlights are a brief sampling of available tools and how they have been implemented within various teacher training programs.

Other research describes how centralized online sharing enables teachers to share emotions and build camaraderie (Hur & Brush, 2009; Krutka et al., 2014) and/or explore new ideas (Chen, 2012; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Krutka et al., 2014). Hur and Brush (2009) completed a study on 23 K-12 teachers who voluntarily participated in large (1,000+ participants) online communities for various motives. Hur and Brush found that sharing emotions was one source of motivation and those postings frequently garnered a great deal of attention in the community (p. 291). These interactions regarding emotions tied into the "sense of camaraderie" participants experienced. As the relationships developed over the course of collaborative engagements, the relationships became their own catalyst for increased participation (p. 297). The participants



viewed the online communities as a place to share and validate their emotions and to seek community members' help to collaboratively troubleshoot problems.

Centralizing diverse perspectives within an online space can also enrich the professional development for some individuals. Exploring opinions about interactions and the value of online communities, Duncan-Howell (2010) conducted a survey of 98 teachers to gain insight on their preferences within collaborative spaces. Chen (2012) also investigated these themes in his study on telecollaborative reflection between pairs of pre-service and in-service teachers. Both Duncan-Howell (2010) and Chen's (2012) studies showed participants' positive feedback about collaborative reflection saying it broadened their exposure to diverse ideas. Such feedback was especially valued when it came from teachers or supervisors with experience. The pre-service teachers in the Krutka et al. (2014) study also thought their Edmodo interactions with peers "helped them grow as teacher-candidates and rethink pedagogical choices and possibilities" (p. 91). As these researchers (e.g. Chen, 2012; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Krutka et al., 2014) discovered, online collaborative spaces can increase exposure to diverse ideas thus influencing the professional development of teachers.

From teacher educators' perspectives, collaborative digital spaces can create informal learning environments for pre-service teachers (Krutka et al., 2014). These informal environments could engage individuals' learning or collaborative learning. The ability for teachers to independently study, as enabled by technology, is crucial according to Hampel and Stickler (2015): "the ability to self-train and further develop one's own skills independently becomes indispensable" (p. 9). On the other hand, asynchronous collaborative spaces can also expose teacher trainees to diverse ideas from peers or superiors. These asynchronous features,

however, potentially return to the idea of independent study because individuals can use the space as a learning resource.

In addition to online collaborative spaces, Mason (2000) underscored that computer-mediated communication (CMC) also enables reflective environments. Mason studied six pre-service teachers who utilized an online platform with synchronous discussion capabilities and desktop videoconferencing for peer collaboration and reflection. Key results of Mason's (2000) study included increasingly frequent communication among peers as well as increased learning autonomy from the pre-service teachers (p. 28). Technology is flexible in serving pre-service teachers by creating informal learning environments that extend the teacher training experiences outside of the classroom or formal training. The training component of the current study exploited blogging technology as a tool that is adaptable to the varied needs of pre-service teachers; by centralizing the resources and reflective dialogue, the blog created an informal learning environment.

Teacher educators and trainees profit from the feature of asynchronous interaction that technology enables. In an exploratory study, Nicholson and Bond (2003) analyzed how 17 pre-service teachers used an online discussion board as support during their field-based coursework. They noted an advantage of computer-mediated reflective activity was that it continued conversations outside of the classroom and avoided "time, scheduling, and geographical issues" (p. 261). Asynchronous features aid teacher educators to monitor trainees' progress and activity while students complete field experiences in schools across the district (Nicholson & Bond, 2003). Furthermore, in the Arshavskaya and Whitney (2014) study, the pre-service teacher appreciated that the dialogic blog allowed asynchronous communication and felt the blog created a space for her to develop a relationship with her practicum supervisor. In addition to the

advantage of asynchronous access, participants of collaborative reflection in two studies (see Duncan-Howell, 2010; Nicholson & Bond, 2003) liked the flexibility to reflect within their individually optimal times and conditions. However, Hobb's (2007) study on required reflection suggested teacher educators may see decreased engagement when requirements are emphasized, thus negatively influencing the perceived value of the reflective practices. Time constraints or pressure to immediately discuss topics can hinder the internal processing needed for reflection, but technology offers a viable and adaptable alternative.

Despite the advantages of digital reflection tools, teacher educators must be careful about implementing them. It is critical that digital training tools are designed with meaningful purpose and tasks to build a sense of community for the target learning processes (Chen, 2012; Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Krutka et al., 2014; Nicholson & Bond, 2003). Moreover, learning curves could inhibit the effectiveness of collaborative and/or reflective processes for both teacher educators and pre-service teachers. In Chen's (2012) study on pre-service and in-service teachers' use of telecollaborative reflective activities, the pre-service teachers interviewed the in-service teacher to learn more about the real-world and then the teachers collaboratively lesson planned. Some participants of this study struggled with understanding the hardware and software requirements, which caused disruptions to the reflective process. Even though participants encountered these issues, they still found value in the reflective process.

### *2.2.2 Logistics of utilizing technology for reflection*

As teacher educators design spaces for their reflective communities, there are several key logistics to consider including adaptability, manners of interaction, facilitation, and privacy features. Navigating a combination of diverse personalities, varied experience levels, and sources of motivation demands a flexible community environment. Wenger et al. (2002) reminded

teacher educators that spaces should be adaptable to the dynamic nature of a developing community. From another perspective on social media-based community like Edmodo, Krutka et al. (2014) emphasized the role of interactive features within an online space to enable a flow of information among multiple participants through posts and comments. This advantage was reiterated with the pre-service teachers' positive responses and strong engagement with the Edmodo platform. However, it is important to note that Krutka et al. (2014) pointed to the participants' familiarity with Facebook as a contributing success factor in the use of the new tool, Edmodo: "Facebook seemingly allowed us to avoid the learning curve often associated with new technologies" (p. 88). While Krutka et al. (2014) found successful interactions on a social media network, Killeavy and Moloney (2010) warned about the use of blogs for reflection. In their study on novice Irish teachers who reflected on individual blogs, Killeavy and Moloney (2010) saw little development of reflective behaviors, and they believed this was because there was no dialogic activity, or two-way electronic communication, to build a sense of community. This lack of dialogic activity relates to what Gelfuso and Dennis (2014) said about the potential positive influence facilitation can play in cultivating a reflective environment. The present study explores the logistics of utilizing a collaborative blog platform from the perspective of both the blog facilitator and participants.

Technology offers advantages for community building, but an overarching facilitator or moderator can often strengthen the foundation or infrastructure of a community. In Preece's (2004) work regarding etiquette and social interactions within a community, one area of focus was the role of facilitators. While Preece recommended facilitation as a beneficial option in a community, others caution that facilitation is essential to an effective community (see Reich et al., 2011; Nonis et al., 2000). This claim of facilitation being essential raises the question about

the investment and resources required on the part of a facilitator. To frame the conversation, one can look at Berg's (1998) public policy on technology-based learning. Berg declared that creating a quality online community experience could require a significant amount of time from the facilitator. Germain-Rutherford (2015) more specifically outlined the facilitator's time investment to include regular communication, such as reminders to post and respond within the community and status tracking and updates. Other researchers (e.g. Nishino, 2012; Preece, 2004; Raywid, 1993) drew attention to the other side of the equation by saying that teacher educators must specifically dedicate time to reflection, which may be challenging given possible scarcity of resources and the demands of their other responsibilities.

One critical aspect of logistics that often receives a great deal of attention is privacy of the reflection. The potentially sensitive nature of reflection makes privacy features an integral part of a successful reflective community. In Hur and Brush's (2009) study on teachers' voluntary participation in large (at least 1,000 participants) online communities, interviews with the participants revealed a variety of motives for participation. One key motive noted by the participants was the anonymity the large online communities offered; they often did not share concerns or problems with colleagues within their immediate school environment because they feared being viewed as inept (p. 293). Hur and Brush (2009) concluded that an online environment where teachers can participate freely, receive constructive feedback, and maintain a degree of privacy was vital. For their collaborative reflection among pre-service teachers, Krutka et al. (2014) specifically chose Edmodo as they desired a "medium that would afford collaborative reflection while also maintaining the proper level of privacy needed for the types of discussions we anticipated" (p. 86). Contrastingly, participants of the Killeavy and Moloney (2010) study used individual blogs without specific privacy features, which was of particular

concern to the novice teachers as they felt vulnerable to an audience that may have been larger than their class. The Reich et al. (2011) study, however, showed participants' favorability for the benefits of reflection outweighed their insecurities regarding privacy. This study explored the TAs' thoughts on the privacy of the blog.

### *2.2.3 Relationships between technology and face-to-face interactions*

Vygotsky's ideas regarding socioculturally-formed knowledge have become a fundamental feature in teacher education given their correlation to professional development (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Chen, 2012; Golombek & Johnson, 2004). Teacher educators are implementing programs and tools both online and in-person to tap into the sociocultural learning opportunities. For example, the blog dialogue between a pre-service teacher and practicum supervisor of Arshavskaya and Whitney's (2014) study exemplified online sociocultural learning. Arshavskaya and Whitney argued the role of the supervisor is one of a mediator who creates an expert-novice pairing that facilitates the novice's learning (p. 732). In this example from Arshavskaya and Whitney, the pre-service teacher provided positive comments about the professional learning that she felt were primarily influenced by the online interactions. Similarly, Duncan-Howell's (2010) survey of 98 teachers revealed their opinions of online professional communities: teachers prefer learning methods involving colleagues regardless of it occurring in-person or electronically. Duncan-Howell interpreted this as the teachers' preference for co-learning with colleagues and extrapolates by saying "teachers respond best to socially constructed knowledge" (p. 332). Hagan (2007) specifically implemented a discussion board as a reflective tool for her group of six teachers citing the tool's embodiment of sociocultural learning theory. Duncan-Howell's (2010) and Hagan's (2007) work

contributed to the argument that sociocultural learning opportunities are worthwhile for teachers' professional development whether they occur online or in-person.

Vygotskian (1987) theory of sociocultural learning is frequently incorporated as a theoretical basis for collaborative reflective learning which uses technology (see Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Hur & Brush, 2009). Sociocultural learning can often organically develop in classroom discussions or group work. Yet, using online resources to extend the collaboration can yield a novel experience as reflective discussions are not as restricted by time and distances. Some forms of sociocultural learning, such as blogs or discussion boards, could also become a centralized record of information to be referenced later by teachers. There are the benefits of social interactions for synchronous videoconferencing as well. McConnell, Parker, Eberhardt, Koehler, and Lundeberg (2013) did a comparative study of teacher groups that participated in videoconferencing or face-to-face learning communities. McConnell et al. found that regardless of the teachers' preference for face-to-face professional development, the social interactions online and in-person were very similar. Thus, the teachers' perceived the videoconferencing as a desirable, engaging form of professional development when time and distance were obstacles.

Turn-of-the-century research on teacher collaboration emphasized face-to-face interaction for teacher training (see Farrell, 1999; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). As technology has improved, more recent research has investigated the value of technology versus face-to-face training (Matzat, 2013; McConnell et al., 2013). Despite the comparable professional development experiences technology offers, McConnell et al. (2013) found teachers still often prefer face-to-face training. An example of face-to-face training can be found in Farrell's (1999) research. This study examined a Korean EFL teacher development group and their types of

interactions within reflective group discussions. Two of the Korean EFL teachers specifically emphasized the value they found through in-person collaborative reflection discussion groups: “we believe that the successful sharing that can result from this kind of [reflective] dialogue group empowers every member of the group” (p. 12). The individual empowerment afforded by the in-person interactions seemed to serve the dual purpose of establishing teacher autonomy while also validating teachers’ contributions in a professional community. In Feiman-Nemser’s (2001) discussion of teacher training, she suggested pre-service teachers develop an early understanding about how to use their colleagues for continued professional development. Feiman-Nemser advocated for teacher educators to instill the following habits in teacher trainees: “professional discourse such as...openness to questions, valuing of alternative perspectives [and] a search for common understandings” (p. 1019). By demonstrating such habits, Feiman-Nemser believed pre-service teachers would begin to value the collegial reflective discussions and the influence on professional development. On the other hand some research (see Chen, 2012; Hagan, 2007) was less emphatic about the need for in-person interactions in collaborative learning. Chen (2012), who conducted a study on telecollaborative interactions between pre-service and in-service teachers, did acknowledge the potential value of face-to-face conversations. However, Chen viewed the in-person interaction as supplemental and primarily serving a logistical purpose by enabling feedback and functionality questions from participants.

While some may doubt the value of a hybrid approach, feedback from Hagan (2007) and Matzat’s (2013) studies demonstrated the potentially positive effects of employing a blended model of in-person and online collaborative learning. Hagan (2007) studied collaborative reflection discussion boards between both novice and experienced teachers. Participants of Hagan’s study only interacted through the online discussion board. Through interviews with the



novice teachers, Hagan discovered the teachers had a preference to meet in-person before starting the discussion board. They felt such a meeting might have increased their comfort with the collaborative reflection process. Matzat's (2013) study of Dutch online teacher networks found similar benefits of blending online communities with in-person interactions: there was more trust and engagement among the participants. According to Matzat, the practical information teachers gained from in-person interactions was perceived as enrichment of the online experience. However, the degrees of engagement need to be researched further to understand the extent to which face-to-face or online interactions influence the teachers' working knowledge and the subsequent effects in the classroom. Learning from Hagan (2007) and Matzat's (2013) findings, the current study examines teacher trainees' perceptions of a hybrid approach for collaborative reflection and its overall effectiveness.

Teacher educators must recognize that face-to-face collaboration is not innately perfect and can create its own set of challenges. Bailey and Willett (2004) offered perspectives on the merits of group work or face-to-face group interactions within teacher training and highlighted the importance of individuals feeling prepared. Specifically, Bailey and Willett argued that there is often an important step missing prior to collaborative reflection, which may affect the overall quality. They suggested trainees have time allocated to individual reflection; then, the trainees would feel validated in having something to contribute within larger group interactions. Based on Farrell's (1999) research on reflective discussions among Korean EFL teachers, administrators identified the challenges of the teachers' defensiveness and distrust; the communities lacked trust and openness. As a result, Farrell claimed that the complex nature of interactions must be considered carefully when bringing groups together for reflective tasks (p. 13). Without that openness, the conversations might not be as beneficial for the participants. The pre-service

teacher in Arshavskaya and Whitney's (2014) study on reflective blogs also believed face-to-face interactions to be more threatening than those occurring through blog dialogue. In Germain-Rutherford's (2015) study on a hybrid community of reflective practice, she noted teachers' online engagement decreased significantly following the in-person sessions. She noted this decrease in activity may be another demotivating aspect of in-person meetings, but she did not offer her thought as to why. Perhaps the online interactions did not feel as valuable in comparison to those that could occur in meetings. While several other factors could influence participants' engagement, Germain-Rutherford suggested the facilitator model online interactions (p. 130) to improve the overall community experience and encourage conversations to continue in the online realm.

## **2.3 Learning communities**

### *2.3.1 Building a learning community*

Defining a learning community is equally as challenging as defining reflection. The challenge in defining a learning community stems from the diverse manifestations of a community as well as the dynamic characteristics that learning communities may exhibit. Regardless of the manifestations, Germain-Rutherford (2015) discussed a common goal of a learning community: "to develop and expand one's knowledge and expertise by engaging in meaningful interactions with fellow professionals" (p. 115), though effectively establishing learning communities for teachers can be daunting for teacher educators. Reich et al. (2011) researched pre-service teachers' reflective discussions within a social networking site dedicated to U.S. social studies teachers. The broad audience expanded the teachers' exposure to fresh insights. Reich et al. asserted that the teacher educators acknowledged the utility of collaborative learning while also understanding that sustained engagement in collaborative learning can be

difficult for teachers to achieve (p. 115). Without guidance on how to build sustainable communities, teacher educators may be deterred from the idea of establishing a community. Yet, Germain-Rutherford (2015) offered a foundation for teacher educators to draw upon when she developed a checklist of desirable features for a learning community. Inspired by Wenger's work on communities of practices (2002; 2006), Germain-Rutherford's (2015) checklist incorporated features that promote effective interactions. A sampling of the features include "engaged members, a shared repertoire of practices, problem solving [activities], seeking experience, and [development] of both public and private community spaces" (p. 132-3). These are examples of factors that contribute to a successful online learning community. A checklist may provide guidelines, but the definition of a learning community and its efficacy is dependent on its individual context and purpose.

The spaces for collaborative learning have been expanded with the increased use of technology for community building (Gomez et al., 2008; Krutka et al., 2014; Reich et al., 2011). As previously discussed, technology can connect community members across distance and offers the advantages of asynchronous activity. Yet, researchers (e.g. Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Preece, 2004) have argued that the presence of facilitation (or lack thereof) relates to the efficacy of a community's reflective activities. Using qualitative and quantitative survey methods, Brannan and Bleistein (2012) explored 47 ESL teachers' perceptions about social support networks. The ESL teachers shared how various social groups (e.g. family, friends, colleagues, etc.) influenced their beliefs and approach in the classroom. Input from family and friends often ranked higher in importance than colleagues (p. 520). Because of the dependence on social groups outside of the workplace, Brannan and Bleistein concluded teacher educators should model how teachers could build a social network with colleagues. Brannan and Bleistein, similar to Feiman-Nemser (2001),

argued that collegial discussions may be an overlooked source of professional development. Others (e.g. Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Reich et al., 2011) concurred that demonstrating the ease and benefits of co-learning might encourage teachers' continued engagement in learning communities. Feiman-Nemser (2001) believed this practice to be especially crucial during the pre-service stage of teacher education; she remained optimistic that early development of such habits could be sustained in long-term professional development.

Additional research (see Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Golombek & Johnson, 2004) argued that facilitators play an integral role in a learning community. Gelfuso and Dennis (2014) based their argument on Dewey's (1933) emphasis of the crucial function communities have in cultivating knowledge. Gelfuso and Dennis thought facilitators could lead those communities. After combining the communal learning approach with Vygotsky's (1987) idea of the "knowledgeable other" as a support structure, Gelfuso and Dennis (2014) found the combination they wanted. They designed their study on video recordings and reflective discussions to match their definition of a learning community (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014, p. 2). Gelfuso and Dennis originally believed pre-service teachers are pushed to reflect more deeply on their experiences by contrasting it with insights offered by a "knowledgeable other." A key implication from Gelfuso and Dennis' study was that facilitators with teaching experience (i.e. supervisors, experienced colleagues) are a crucial support structure for effective reflective communities. During the conversations about the pre-service teachers' video-recorded lessons, the facilitators guided the reflection (p. 1). Gelfuso and Dennis noted that while the facilitators cultivated the reflective environment, further research was needed to understand how they could directly influence the pre-service teachers' reflection process. Golombek and Johnson (2004) agreed with Gelfuso and Dennis' (2014) that teacher educators played an important role and identified a teacher educator

as an “expert other” (p. 324). To investigate critical reflection, Golombek and Johnson (2004) examined narrative inquiries for insights on second language teachers’ development. Golombek and Johnson explained how the expert role involves linking teachers’ understandings with terms or trends from the field and exposing teachers to tools or methods they could use outside of teacher education training (p. 324). Freeman (1989) explained that the collaborator (facilitator) could implement strategies to “expand the teacher’s awareness” of their own teaching choices (p. 41). Freeman claimed the collaborator must also draw teachers’ attention to the unique complexity of each teaching issue and the possible resolutions to those issues. Beyond the name of a collaborator (Freeman, 1989), other research described a similar support structure within a learning community as a mediator (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014) or moderator (Nicholson & Bond, 2003). Regardless of the nomenclature, there is a commonality of responsibilities, which strengthens the argument that a learning community benefits from the infrastructure or guidance provided by a facilitator.

Other research pointed out that the infrastructure of a learning community does not always require a person to be the main support structure. Gelfuso and Dennis (2014) stated that learning communities can also have theories or research as support structures; the theories or research could still serve as a knowledgeable other because they provide a different insight or perspective for teacher trainees. These non-person facilitative structures can also include “focused topics” used in reflective tasks (Nicholson & Bond, 2003, p. 263). Thoughtful reflective prompts enable a learning community to naturally cultivate ideas without being too restrictive or directed. Similar to Nicholson and Bond’s (2003) idea of focused topics, Bailey and Willett (2004) argued that facilitators can provide guidance to scaffold the collaborative reflection process. In relation to teacher education trends, Bailey and Willett discussed merits of

group work among teacher trainees but warned that the trainees could sometimes feel discouraged from asking for expert insight or from seeking alternative perspectives within a group. Bailey and Willett recognized that a group of teacher trainees may have similar levels of (in)experience, thus creating a “self-reliance” within the groups (p. 17). To address this, Bailey and Willett suggested that a teacher educator intervene with appropriate scaffolding to discourage such self-reliance, thus motivating the overall collaboration.

### *2.3.2 Peer influence in a learning community*

Although peer-to-peer learning is something encouraged by a learning community, Germain-Rutherford (2015) declared, “the level of emotion participants feel while engaged in the different activities of the community...is an important factor” (p. 116). A lack of feeling safe within that online space could inhibit engagement. The study on K-12 teachers by Hur and Brush (2009) showed evidence that sharing the emotions of teaching experiences is one motivating factor for teachers’ participation in “self-generated online communities” (p. 279). Furthermore, Hur and Brush commented on the increased engagement for posts regarding emotions, regardless of them being positive or negative emotions. Responses to original posts offered “emotional support” or “possible solutions” (p. 291), which aided in the building of community bonds. Those bonds are another desirable aspect of online engagement, and participants of the Hur and Brush study described the importance of a “sense of camaraderie” (p. 291). For teachers who might previously have felt secluded before participating in the community, and this sense of community was reassuring; it encouraged them to be more objective with their reflection. Hur and Brush insisted that further exploration of the emotional sharing in learning communities would complement the findings about the benefits of knowledge sharing. Levin (2000) echoed Hur and Brush’s findings in her study on peer-to-peer email exchanges among an undergraduate

cohort of pre-service teachers. The cohort members utilized the email exchanges to share emotions and voice concerns, seek support from peers, and reflect on personal development as teachers. In both studies (e.g. Hur & Brush, 2009; Levin, 2000), participants noted how their emotions and experiences were validated through their various collaborative reflection. These combinations of contexts and motivations for participation underscored the emotional effects that can occur in learning communities.

Once a community is established, the element of trust can shape the norms and interactions occurring within the community (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Farrell, 1999; Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Mason, 2000; Preece, 2004). Clear and consistent messaging about the purpose of reflective activities is a building block for trusting relationships, but it may take time for the trust to grow (Preece, 2004). During this cultivation of trust, the norms of community interactions define appropriate conduct (Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Preece, 2004). Arshavskaya and Whitney (2014) shared an example of the effects of a trusting environment with their dialogic blog between a pre-service teacher and a supervisor: “[the pre-service teacher] shifted from simply receiving mediation from the supervisor to eliciting and engaging mediation from the supervisor” (p. 733). In effect, the trust between the parties contributed to the transition from the pre-service teacher being a passive learner to an active learner within a community (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014). The resulting knowledge sharing of a trusting community can become important to overall professional development.

Cohort models are another way for teacher educators to establish peer groups for teacher trainees, usually with the peers being in similar phases of professional development (Levin, 2000). Levin considers these cohorts to be “pre-professional communities for learning” (p. 260). Within a cohort community, teachers may share issues they encounter in the classroom or in field

experiences (Krutka et al., 2014; Levin, 2000; Mason, 2000; Nicholson & Bond, 2003). Specifically, Krutka et al.'s (2014) study revealed that pre-service teachers attributed their "growth in craft and reconsideration of pedagogical decisions" to their cohort peers. The discussion board component of the Levin (2000) study similarly demonstrated cohort members' appreciation of opportunities for peer learning including feedback from multiple people (p. 151). Mason's (2000) study validated the idea that pre-service teachers can participate in professional conversations, especially when using CMC. These reflective conversations could originate from experimentation in practice. In particular, Nicholson and Bond (2003) noted that the collaborative cohort structure enables teachers to support each other while they experiment with new instructional techniques or methods (p. 263). Having opportunities to talk through such experimentation with peers pools the cohort members' knowledge, exposes members to diverse perspectives, and ideally enriches the reflection. All of these examples show how a practical aspect of support that can be found within a learning community.

After sharing begins in a learning community, peers may start to recognize the value peers can add to each other's overall development. A participant of the Nicholson and Bond (2003) study thought the discussion board empowered the participants to collaborate as professionals (p. 271). Additionally, multiple participants from Krutka et al. (2014) study on pre-service teachers' use of Edmodo perceived the peer-to-peer collaborative interactions as valuable for their overall professional development. Within Nishino's (2012) study on teacher development discussion groups, the teachers observed each other teacher one class session. One participant felt inspired after observing his peer and immediately incorporated the desirable methods into his own classroom. While peer-to-peer interactions may be desirable for some community members (Hur & Brush, 2009), collaborative learning can also be valued for the



exposure to diverse perspectives (Reich et al., 2011), which expands students' professional repertoire. Returning to Preece's (2004) etiquette of learning communities, an environment where peers trust each other will most likely create a community where members value and respect those diverse perspectives. This is one example of how collaborative communities can be productive.

Despite all of the benefits one might find in a peer learning community, the communities do not exist in isolation. Other factors, such as time, involvement in other learning communities, and teacher education courses can influence the support peers receive and give in collaborative reflection. Implementation of the discussion board was intended to extend conversations beyond the weekly meetings. Nicholson and Bond (2003) questioned their own definition of a community after considering how little interactions occurred during their infrequent meetings; there were only two in-person debrief meetings each week over a 10-week period (p. 265). Specifically, Nicholson and Bond realized participants with low participation on the discussion board seemed unengaged during the debrief meetings. Ultimately, Nicholson and Bond concluded concurrent interactions with outside communities, such as other professors, classmates, and teachers from fieldwork, may have detracted from the participants' engagement. Reich et al.'s (2011) used online collaboration to broaden social studies teachers' exposure to varying perspectives, and it seemed to effectively exploit the cross-community interactions. The social studies teachers participated in online communities with teachers from across the U.S., which integrated members' reflective observations from many unique contexts. For a deeper understanding about the experiences afforded by a learning community, this study examines if the training program participants perceived the establishment of a learning community or how interactions in the learning community have influenced them.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter contains a description of the methodology utilized for this mixed-methods ethnographic study. The descriptions cover the following aspects: context of the study, participants, research design, data collection, and data analysis.

### **3.1 Context for the study**

#### *3.1.1 The setting of the study*

This study was conducted entirely within the intensive English program (IEP) at a large Midwestern university during the 2015-2016 academic year. Each year the IEP accepts a cohort of graduate teaching assistants (TAs) who are studying in the Master's program for Teaching English as a Second Language or select PhD programs focused on curriculum and instruction or global education. The amount of TAs in a cohort varies each academic year. During the 2015-2016 academic year, the IEP had 11 full-time lecturers and nine TAs with an approximately 200 students at the IEP over the course of the year. The full-time lecturers experience levels ranged from five to 30 years, and they had a mix of EFL and ESL teaching experience. Four of the nine TAs had at least one year of experience teaching at the IEP.

Outside of the onboarding process for teachers new to the IEP, a new co-teaching practicum was established for two of the five incoming TAs. The reason those TAs were selected for the practicum was because they did not have any previous teaching experience before their initial semester in Fall 2015. Muriel, the IEP Director, implemented this practicum as a way to address accreditation requirements related to teacher qualifications. By working with an experienced teacher, a novice teacher received the additional training needed to meet the accreditation standard of a "qualified teacher." The practicum involved training on co-teaching for the full-time lecturers, who were called the Cooperating Teachers (CT). Even though the

Director approached the CTs with the opportunity, the CTs' participation in the practicum was voluntary. The semester-long practicum began with the TAs observing the CT but after a few weeks it transitioned into co-teaching with shared planning and teaching responsibilities. Toward the final weeks of the semester, the TA took ownership over all responsibilities with minimal intervention from the CT. Overall, the experience was intended to help the TAs acquire the skills and competencies from an experienced teacher needed as they transitioned into their new teaching role at the IEP.

The IEP also has an in-house professional development program with workshops held one to two times per month. These workshops are open to all lecturers, staff, and TAs within the IEP. Some of the meetings are dedicated to one speaker's focus on a specific topic, while others are more interactive and encourage sharing among the participants. The workshop topics are applicable for experienced and novice teachers alike. Overall, the IEP has a very strong focus on collaborative learning and professional development. IEP staff is encouraged to participate in committees internal to the IEP, attend of campus-sponsored training, join professional organizations, and present at regional and national conferences.

### *3.1.2 The teaching assistant (TA) training program*

Prior to the 2015 fall semester, the onboarding for new TAs was primarily conducted through the orientation sessions the week before the fall semester. The goal of the pre-semester orientation was to provide a foundation of administrative information the new TAs would need to transition into their roles at the IEP. Beyond the pre-semester orientation, there was only one other informal activity, which involved observations of experienced lecturers from the IEP. The IEP's academic coordinator assigned TAs to observe experienced lecturers. The observation was

then followed by a brief in-person debrief. Both the observation and debrief occurred within the first few weeks of the semester.

To meet accreditation requirements, however, the new TA onboarding needed modifications. First, the re-design of the training program included improved pre-semester orientation modules and an expansion of the training to support the new TAs throughout the entirety of their first semester as a TA. Second, the new TAs who had little to no teaching experience also needed the co-teaching practicum. This practicum offered training beyond what they might gain through their graduate coursework. Third, a presentation component about technology in the classroom was added. The requirement was a five-minute presentation on one classroom technology tool of the TA's choice. The Director chose to implement that based on research that showed computer-assisted language learning (CALL) teacher-training is most successful when incorporated at various stages throughout the pre-service program (Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Healy et al., 2009). Each of the TAs made her technology presentation during a special session of the IEP's in-house professional development program. The presentation also served as an activity that to help the TAs build up their curriculum vitae. Fourth, a teaching philosophy component was also developed for the beginning and end of the semester. Finally, and most importantly as it was the central focus of this study, there was a collaborative reflection component. It was a hybrid reflection model that was conducted through a blog and in-person meetings. This component covered four different training topics and was spaced through the semester. The TAs completed a revision of their teaching philosophies as a culminating assignment. All of these changes established a training program that was strategically designed to provide a more holistic onboarding experience for the new TAs and ease their transition into a new teaching setting.

### *3.1.3 The collaborative reflection blog and meetings*

The primary focus of this study is the hybrid model which used a reflection blog and in-person debrief meetings to facilitate collaborative reflection. The IEP director, Muriel, chose a WordPress blog for the reflection journal tool and 30-45 minute in-person meetings to deliver content on key teacher development topics. Asynchronous communication and centralized access to resources were two more practical reasons the Director used the blog. From an administrative perspective, the blog enabled tracking of the TAs' professional development. The Director facilitated the in-person debrief meetings to allow for discussion of thoughts and questions around each topic. There was only one exception to that facilitation structure in which the IEP's in-house technology expert facilitated a meeting prior to the blog responses.

The topics of the blog prompts correlated with milestones of the IEP's semester schedule. All topics were intended to promote reflection that in turn could help the new TAs acclimate to their new teaching environment and develop skills needed to improve practices. Two such milestones were the early semester observations of experienced lecturers and mid-semester feedback from the IEP students. As an example, for the observations of experienced lecturers, the TAs began their debrief by responding to a prompt on the reflection blog. Then, the Director and TAs met to discuss further details. The classroom management reflection topic followed the mid-semester feedback that the TAs received from their IEP students. This allowed the TAs to reflect on their approaches in the classroom and develop action plans for the remainder of the semester.

The four training topics included observations of experienced teachers, technology in the classroom, classroom management, and professional development. The IEP director, Muriel, wrote separate blog prompts to encourage exploration and reflection of each of topic, and TAs

were encouraged to provide feedback through comments on peers' blog posts and discuss ideas during the in-person meeting. Prior to the new training program, the observation activity was very loosely structured. The revised observation topic was the first development topic for the new training program. The prompt asked participants to write a reflective blog entry focused on the methodology and techniques they observed as well as how those aspects could influence their own teaching choices. For the second topic of technology in the classroom, the meeting preceded the blog post. The in-house technology expert, Enora, facilitated the meeting. She asked the TAs to consider their own experiences as teachers and students before responding to questions about how technology shapes the classroom experience. The blog prompt followed the meeting and asked participants to share a technology tool they were interested in and the potential classroom applications. This was intended to prepare for the classroom technology tool presentations to be delivered at the IEP's in-house professional development. The third topic was classroom management, which was strategically scheduled after mid-semester feedback from students. Participants reflected on the anonymous feedback from students to gain insight on their performance in the classroom. Then, the participants developed ideas about what to continue or adapt for the rest of the semester. For the final topic, there was a meeting prior to the assignment. The meeting encouraged discussion and brainstorming of activities that would become part of a professional development timeline each participant had to create. This timeline was then posted on the blog for accountability and as a culminating activity for the reflective blog component of the training.

## **3.2 The participants**

### *3.2.1 Participant recruitment*

Given the ethnographic approach of this study, recruitment was limited to participants of the IEP's new TA training program and the IEP's director. The TA cohort was composed of five TAs who were new to the IEP in the Fall semester of 2015. All of the new TAs participated in the new TA training program, which included the newly developed collaborative reflection component. In the spring semester of 2016, all participants (including the TAs and the director) were invited via email to participate in this study because of their involvement with the training program. After consenting to participate, each TA and the Director received a digital survey to complete prior at their convenience. There was no requirement that the survey be completed prior to the in-person interview. The in-person interviews were scheduled according to the TAs' availability during the times proposed by the researcher. All of the invited TAs, except the PhD student, participated in the digital survey and in-person interview conducted by the researcher. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of the TAs and the Director to maintain confidentiality.

### *3.2.2 Background of the participants*

The participants of this study were five female graduate students who were new TAs at the IEP in the Fall 2015 semester. Four of the five graduate students were in the Master's in Teaching English as a Second Language (MATESL) program at the university and the other was in a PhD program for curriculum and instruction with a concentration on bilingual education. Although this was their first semester of teaching at the IEP, they had a mixture of previous teaching experiences both in terms of tenure and teaching contexts. Basic information about each participant is found in the Table 1:

Table 1  
*TAs' academic programs and teaching experience*

Name	Programs of study	Years of teaching experience	Prior teaching settings
Anne	MATESL	9*	EFL in Japan; ESL in Canada
Ashley	MATESL	0	No prior experience
Catherine	MATESL	6*	EFL in India; ESL in U.S. high school
Judith	PhD, Education	8	EFL in Colombia; ESL in U.S. IEP
Lucy	MATESL	0	No prior experience

\*These numbers included some tutoring

Lastly, the IEP director, Muriel, was the primary facilitator of the training program. Muriel was in the beginning of her second academic year as the Director of the IEP. She initiated the changes to the TA training program to improve the overall training experience while simultaneously achieving industry accreditation requirements. The researcher collaborated with the director to develop and adapt the TA training program. Additionally, the researcher assisted in establishing and administering the collaborative blog and observed the in-person meetings. It is important to note the researcher did not actively participate in the blog commentary or meetings except when asked for opinions by the Director. These were isolated cases and mostly instigated by the Director's desire for the researcher to share her experience as a second-year TA.

### **3.3 Research design**

This study used a research approach aligned with the concept of communities of practice, which was first introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). Regardless of communities' formation being natural or intentional, they are connected via mutual learning goals among the community



members (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The TAs in this training program ultimately formed a community of practice, which the researcher analyzed for this study. The researcher was involved in the programming changes for the new TA training and observed the reflective component through its entirety of the fall 2015 semester. Throughout the semester-long training, the researcher conducted field observations of the exchanges of insights and experience among the TAs and the Director. The focus of the field notes was to identify how the collaborative reflection experience affected the TAs and the Director. Observations of the TA community of practice influenced the researcher's utilization of mixed methods to gain discrete-point overviews that were then expanded upon through qualitative research methods of open-ended surveys and in-person interviews.

Corbin and Strauss's (2014) qualitative grounded theory research method served as the foundation for the data analysis of this study. The language of "grounded" stems from the idea that theories can be drawn from the data collected during qualitative research. Human behaviors and experiences can be challenging to analyze, and Corbin and Strauss proposed grounded theory as an alternative to the rigid designs of quantitative data analysis. According to Corbin and Strauss, theories should be established based on concepts that emerge from the data collected. For them, this provided authentic insights instead of testing the validity of a theory. The grounded theory method seeks well-developed concepts across collected data. In this case, well-developed means that the concepts are consistent across all data but may also include some variation to "increase the depth and breadth or explanatory power of our theory" (p. 370). These concepts are then organized into higher-level categories that are "more abstract;" the abstract quality is a result of showing the variation of details. In summary, it is a system of building blocks: the concepts are the details of a category and those categories shape the grounded theory

(p. 77). To the researcher, the accommodation to show variation made the most sense for the qualitative, ethnographic approach.

### 3.4 Data collection

The data collected for this research took place during the following time frames:

Table 2

*Data collection timeline*

Data collection procedure	Topic	Media	When it occurred
Blog entries	Collaborative reflection journal blog	WordPress	Fall Semester 2015
In-person meetings	Collaborative reflection meetings	Researcher's notes, audio recording	Fall Semester 2015
Fall 2015 New TA Survey	Overall feedback on the new TA training program	University survey webtool	End of Fall Semester 2015
Digital survey	Biographical information, teaching background, perceptions of collaborative reflection experience	University survey webtool	February 2016
TA individual interviews	Overall experience with the blog and meetings, reflective practices, learning communities	Face-to-face, researcher's notes, audio recording	February 2016
Director individual interview	Overall experience with the blog and meetings, reflective practices, learning communities	Face-to-face, researcher's notes, audio recording	March 2016

#### 3.4.1 Fall 2015 New TA Survey

One insightful data set for this study was a survey that sought feedback from the TAs regarding all aspects of the new TA training program. The IEP Director administered the survey

at the end of the Fall 2015 semester (Appendix A). Throughout the remainder of this study, this survey is referenced as the Fall survey. It was intended to provide a general picture of the TAs' overall perceptions about the successes and weaknesses of the program to inform future program administrative decisions.

The IEP Director sent the Fall survey through the university's internal platform designed to provide secure access and storage of surveys. All five of the TA participants completed the survey anonymously. To gain access to the survey data, the researcher conferred with the Director to identify the aspects of the accreditation documentation that would illustrate the TAs' perceptions of the TA training program. Then, the Director provided printouts of the survey questions and responses for the researcher's analysis. This provided the researcher context for TAs' opinions about the training and its administration; this contextual insight contributed to the formation of the individual surveys and interviews the researcher conducted with the four TAs who consented to share their opinions.

Overall, the end-of-semester survey had 31 questions covering all major components of the TA training program. Question types were varied and included those using Likert scale, open-ended short answer, multiple choices, and Yes/Maybe/No responses. The digital survey did not restrict users' participation as it did not require answers to any of the questions, so some of the questions were skipped by a fraction of the participants. Table 3 demonstrates the total number of each question type as well as the number of each type that were specific to the collaborative reflection blog experience:

Table 3  
*Question types on the Fall 2015 New TA Survey*

	Total number	# specific to the reflective experience
Likert	17	12
Open-ended short answer	7	4
Multiple choices	4	4
Yes/(Maybe)/No	3	3
Total	31	23

Of the 23 questions relevant to the collaborative reflection experience, the topics included: the perception of relative value, utilization of the blog as a tool and resource, the amount of time required for participation, and establishment of a learning community. Question #2 used a Likert scale and asked TAs for their opinion on the utility of the blog: “The collaborative reflection blog [was]” with the scale options of: Very Helpful, Somewhat Helpful, Neutral, Somewhat Unhelpful, Very Unhelpful. Open-ended questions were fairly straight forward as they asked TAs to share answers in their own words. An example of a multiple choice question was Question #18: “How much time do you think you spent TOTAL on the blog this semester?” and answers choices were: Less than 1 hour, 1-2 hours, 2-3 hours, 3-4 hours, 4+ hours. The variety of questions offered both qualitative and quantitative perspectives about the collaborative reflection experience.

#### *3.4.2 The blog and meetings*

Throughout the 2015-2016 academic year, the researcher had access to the reflective blog as a co-administrator of the WordPress blog platform. This allowed direct visibility to the posts and comments during the fall semester, which were later analyzed for the purposes of this study. Additionally, the researcher attended the meetings that complemented each of the blog posts and

recorded them. The recordings of the meetings were done to capture the discussions in an electronic form that could be shared on the blog for later access by any of the TAs or the Director. As co-administrator of the blog, the researcher added each of the meeting recordings to the blog as soon as possible after the meetings. These recordings were later transcribed for the purpose of analysis in this study. More details about the analysis will be included later.

### *3.4.3 TA surveys and interviews*

The TA surveys and interviews were conducted with all of the new TAs except the PhD student, Judith. Prior to the individual in-person interviews, the researcher administered digital surveys to collect additional biographical data regarding the TAs' background and their general perceptions of the collaborative reflection experience. Each TA was invited to participate via email (Appendix B), and after completing a consent form (Appendix C), the researcher sent the digital survey (Appendix D) to be completed at the TA's convenience before the in-person interview.

The digital survey followed a structured, consistent format for the TAs. It had a total of 20 questions with 18 being open-ended, short answer questions and two using the Likert scale. The questions topics included: demographic information, language learning experience, teaching experience, professional development activities, and opinions on the collaborative reflection process. One Likert scale question asked TAs to rate the importance of reflective teaching practices on a 5-point scale with 1 being not important at all to 5 being very important. The other Likert scale question asked TAs to rate how comfortable they were with their reflective teaching practices with a 5-point scale with 1 being not comfortable at all and 5 being very comfortable. This survey provided the researcher with information that contextualized each TAs' language

learning and teaching background. All background information was considered prior to each in-person interview and used later in the analysis.

In addition to the survey, each TA was instructed to use an online scheduling tool to show her availability to participate in a 30-45 minute interview. The researcher scheduled the interviews to accommodate each participant's schedule. Interviews were semi-structured as they had pre-determined questions (Appendix E) aligned with the research themes. There was a standard set of interview questions to establish consistency in the data collected on the perceptions of the reflection training component. However, the flexibility in the interview structure enabled the researcher to follow-up on specific responses from the digital survey or those that arose during the interviews. The researcher took handwritten notes during each interview and used a program, Audacity, to record the session. Each interview recording was transcribed for the subsequent phase of data analysis.

#### *3.4.4 IEP Director survey and interview*

Parallel to the approach with the TAs, the researcher asked the IEP Director to participate in the research process with an email invitation (Appendix F). After the Director signed the consent form (Appendix G), the researcher sent the digital survey (Appendix H) and used a semi-structured interview form for the in-person interview (Appendix I). Both provided the researcher with information on the Director's language learning and teaching experience as well as general involvement in professional development, ideas on reflection, and perceptions about the collaborative reflection experience. The in-person interview again had pre-determined questions that aligned with the focus areas of the research but from a program administration perspective. During the interview, the researcher again used the program, Audacity, to create a

recording of the discussion. The recording was later transcribed for use during thematic data analysis.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

While some of the data analysis involved quantitative methods, the majority of the data analysis aligned with qualitative research methodology. The quantitative approach was primarily utilized for analysis of the Fall 2015 New TA Survey; this data came from the Director as she originally administered it to gain feedback from the TAs. Analysis of the entire survey provided a contextual overview of TAs' perspectives of the new TA training program in its entirety. However, the Fall 2015 New TA Survey did contain specific questions that directly connected to perceptions about the collaborative reflection blog and meetings, which served as additional data points for this study. The Likert scale questions presented opportunities for quantitative analyses, which was occasionally followed with an open-ended qualitative question.

In regard to the quantitative analyses, the researcher calculated word counts from entries on the blog. Additionally, the researcher counted examples across specified categories to quantify the contributions from the blog. This same method was used to analyze the meeting transcripts. This provided data to confirm or deny the actual participation TAs had in the reflection component of the training versus the participation the TAs self-reported. Ideally, this practical insight could be used to inform administrators of reflective activities as they are designing their collaborative reflection programs.

Corbin and Strauss' (2014) qualitative research methodology encouraged a search for recurring concepts across the data. Each major similarity and difference was organized into general concepts, and with enough consistency, the concepts were then organized into categories (p. 370). As Corbin and Strauss declared, "in a grounded theory, our purpose is discovery of

concepts and to show how these concepts link together to form explanations. To broaden our explanations, we want to account for as much variation as possible” (p. 370). This method empowers the researchers to account for some variety within a concept. Then, the researchers could build their theories upon those concepts.

Concepts from the TAs’ data presented their trainee perspectives on the collaborative reflection while the Director’s presented a perspective on administration and management of such a training process. The meeting transcriptions were analyzed for major concepts related to the core focus areas of the research. The researcher then compared concepts from the meetings to those found in the blog entries and comments. By comparing the blog entries and comments with the meeting transcripts, the researcher was able to gain insight into the thematic content of the TAs’ participation in the reflective activities. The researcher also compared and contrasted the qualitative data from the TAs’ surveys and interview transcriptions.

To align the Director’s data analysis with that of the TAs’, the researcher also compared and contrasted the Director’s survey and interview transcription. The next step of analysis was finding the commonalities or differences between the TAs’ viewpoints and those of the Director. The observations and analyses culminated into concepts related to each of the major research focus areas of this study: reflective teaching practices, technology’s influence on reflection, and learning communities. Details of each focus area are found in the next chapter.

### **3.6 Ethical Assurances and Conduct**

The researcher complied with IRB standards given the research involved human subjects (see Appendix J) for IRB approval. Participation was voluntary for all TAs and the Director. Access to all data was granted through permission forms signed by the participants. For the Fall survey, all TAs were given permission forms that enabled the researcher to use this anonymous



data. Each of the five TAs signed the permission form granting the researcher access to the survey results. This same permission form also used to granted the researcher access to the TAs' blog content, the meeting recordings, the TAs' digital survey responses, and the interviews. One participant granted access to her data, but she chose not participate in the digital survey and interview. All of the participants were assigned a pseudonym that the researcher used throughout the research. This was to provide the participants' confidentiality as they expressed perceptions about the collaborative reflection process.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Because of the qualitative nature of this study, the findings and discussion are presented together to illustrate the most complete picture possible. This chapter is organized into two main parts. The first part contains brief profiles of each TA and the Director to provide biographical contexts pertinent to understanding the individuals' engagement with the reflective training. Each profile is complemented by an analysis of their involvement in the reflective training and descriptions their overall reactions to the reflective experience. The second part is the most comprehensive as it integrates the quantitative findings with the qualitative. It is broken into three main categories based on each research question. Subcategories provide an in-depth look at the commonalities as well as the variations of details to better support the resulting theories proposed by the researcher.

### **4.1 Participant profiles**

This section provides insight regarding the TAs' teaching background and interests to contextualize their participation and suggest possible connections to concepts from the study's data. The researcher also offers insight into the TAs' roles within the IEP and their personalities as related to the study; these insights came from the researcher's field notes and observations. The profiles are presented in alphabetical order of the TAs' pseudonyms, so there is no significance to the order in which the participant profiles are presented. All TAs were in the first year of their graduate programs at the university and in the first semester of teaching at the IEP.

#### *4.1.1 Anne*

Prior to teaching at the IEP, Anne had 9 years of experience as a tutor or teacher both in EFL and ESL settings. Anne recalled that her interest in the field had roots in her elementary school years. She was always intrigued by her fellow classmates who had extra ESL courses, and

she wondered what was happening in those classes. Yet, Anne's consideration of ESL in a professional sense did not occur until her third year of her undergraduate career.

Anne began her EFL teaching endeavors during her undergraduate study abroad experience in Japan. At that time, Anne tutored Japanese university students in English pronunciation and writing. Without formal training, Anne relied mostly on her linguistics coursework from undergraduate work. The tutoring continued after Anne returned to her undergraduate institute in the U.S.; she worked with children of a visiting scholar who needed help learning English. Following graduation from her undergraduate institute, Anne pursued a one-year ESL teaching certificate program at a university in Canada. Anne did a practicum for advanced listening-speaking students of an IEP as well as freelance tutoring during her time in Canada. Eventually Anne was accepted to the JET Program in Japan and spent about three years there. Her range of responsibilities was expansive given she worked at 11 different schools including at the elementary and junior high levels. She also worked at a special needs institute. These enriching experiences inspired her continued studies through a Master's program in Applied Linguistics. At the time of this study, she was pursuing her second Master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. Anne's passion for teaching is contagious; she thoroughly enjoys teaching. While teaching is fun for her, it is difficult for Anne to ignore her lingering interests in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Anne has hopes of continuing with SLA research and possibly doing a PhD in the future.

The IEP course she taught in the Fall 2015 semester was an advanced listening-speaking course for students in a non-academic track. Anne's bubbly and approachable personality made her an excellent and engaging contributor within the TA learning community, given her extensive experience and previous Master's degree in Applied Linguistics. Her wealth of

knowledge seemed to be especially beneficial for those teachers who had less experience. Anne was careful not to be overbearing with her input but consistently helpful when called upon to share ideas or brainstorm solutions to problems. One distinctive quality about Anne is her eagerness to experiment with technology in the classroom; her enthusiasm was infectious when she drew upon her implementing technology in the classroom, and she willingly shared that practical advice with her fellow TAs and other IEP lecturers.

Despite Anne's interest in reflective activities, she only responded to two of the four blog posts. This was the lowest amount of blog posts for any of the five TAs. Anne's meeting attendance was the same as she only attended two of the four in-person meetings. One absence, however, was for a pre-arranged personal commitment out of town. In her interview, Anne mentioned that she used the blog as a resource after meetings, which suggested she found value in the reflective activity and the asynchronous access to the blog.

Of the four TAs the researcher interviewed, Anne was the only one with previous experience in reflective journaling. Anne described the reflective journaling experience as both a requirement and a former practice. First, Anne said she had fulfilled the reflective journaling requirement for a university teaching practicum. Then, she kept a teaching journal during her time working for a Board of Education in Japan. Anne admitted that it was more difficult to maintain a teaching diary during the Fall 2015 semester and that she was somewhat uncomfortable with her own reflective teaching practices at the time of the study. Based on Anne's feedback from the pre-interview survey and the interview itself, Anne overall seemed to appreciate the collaborative reflection experience.

#### *4.1.2 Ashley*

In her undergraduate career, Ashley was an art history major with a linguistics minor. She began researching Master's degrees after realizing the limitations for employment associated with her art history major. Ashley's few informal teaching experiences and foreign language classes inspired her to pursue a MATESL degree. She already had the desire for a lifetime of traveling, but the MATESL would equip her with useful skills for her future job search. With so many countries outside of the U.S. in need of English teachers, Ashley decided the MATESL could help her achieve her goals of globetrotting and having good job prospects. For Ashley, an ideal location for teaching would be Europe, but there are many places she would like to explore. After graduating from the MATESL program, Ashley would be ready to make the move abroad to teach adults or children. She said a few years of EFL experience would enrich her teaching portfolio. Ashley would eventually return to the U.S. and possibly pursue certification to teach in the public schools.

Ashley did not have formal teaching experience prior to the Fall 2015 semester. The Director placed her in a co-teaching practicum with a reading-writing teacher (her CT was Sylvia) with over 20 years of experience. During the Fall, Ashley gradually took on more teaching responsibilities in an intermediate writing course. Ashley's cohort of students was one of the largest cohorts with 17 students. She was persistent despite the overwhelming workload she faced both in terms of the learning curve for a novice teacher and a demanding schedule with grading multiple rounds of writing drafts and developing lesson plans. Her previous and current dabbling in studies of multiple languages demonstrated her fascination with linguistics and her ability to empathize with her students regarding the language learning process. Ashley's CT from her practicum provided both supervisory and mentoring support, and the co-teacher emphasized

effective classroom management strategies. The researcher noted Ashley's attention to detail and organization as unfailing throughout the semester, which seemed to connect to her high levels of engagement with the blog and in the meetings.

It is worth noting that Ashley's survey indicated she felt a bit challenged by the blogging process because she lacked teaching experience. Yet, Ashley responded to all four blog prompts and attended three of the four in-person meetings. The only meeting absence was due to illness. In her interview, Ashley discussed that she felt comfortable sharing within the community, both online and in-person. She found the asynchronous access to be convenient. Ashley also suggested, however, an increase time for face-to-face interaction while acknowledging the practical challenge of scheduling that with the five TAs' busy weeks.

Informally, the researcher noted Ashley's growth in confidence as a teacher by the end of the Fall 2015 semester. Ashley confirmed this through comments in her interview. Despite not having previous reflective practices, Ashley reported in her survey that she felt somewhat comfortable with her newly established approach to annotate and reflect on lesson plans. Ashley was pleased to collaboratively participate with her peers in the TA learning community. She reiterated that her ideas felt valued not only by her peers, but also by the Director. Overall, Ashley found the collaborative reflection process as good preparation for her first year of teaching and as a means to attain different perspectives to enrich her teacher training.

#### *4.1.3 Catherine*

Catherine is another of the veteran TAs with six years of teaching experience primarily in ESL settings but also with a brief stint in EFL. She had an array of teaching contexts including six months teaching and tutoring EFL in India, basic ESL classes with South Asian immigrants in New York City, low-beginning classes for adult refugees in California, working with retired

Iranian and Armenian adults through a church program, and more formal school settings with an IEP and private high school. Catherine first became involved in the field after hesitantly accepting a teaching role at a refugee center. She felt unprepared on her first day because she did not have any teacher training. Yet, it only took one day to convince Catherine how fun teaching could be! She worked diligently on a TEFL express certificate and applied her new learning into her classroom. These qualifications led Catherine to accept an offer at an IEP; her certificate and experience had confirmed her worthiness. Later on, a full-time position opened at a high school, and while Catherine was hesitant about working with a younger audience, it meant more financial stability. The experience teaching the high schoolers was a positive one for Catherine as she very much appreciated the respectful behavior of the enthusiastic learners. Catherine said this combination of experiences developed her fondness for teaching English. In the future, Catherine hopes to carry her passion for teaching English forward into research and conference presentations. She may even be pursue an entrepreneurial endeavor to develop preparatory online courses for Vietnamese students who are planning studies in the U.S. Catherine's long-term vision is to pursue a PhD and become a teacher trainer.

Although she understood the fundamentals of teaching, Catherine was both eager and open to learning from her peers and the Director through the collaborative reflection experience. The researcher found her to be encouraging to her peers when providing feedback and encouragement on lesson planning and experimentation with new techniques. She taught a beginning level listening-speaking course in the Fall semester, which seemed to be a new focus area for her. Outside of the classroom, Catherine was actively studying Vietnamese as part of her professional development; she viewed this as a way to understand and empathize with her students' language learning processes.

Overall, Catherine's involvement with the collaborative blog was similar to Ashley's because both were very active. Catherine responded to all four prompts and participated in each meeting. In the Spring 2016 semester, Catherine also attempted to initiate discussion on the blog following the TAs' completion of an on-campus certification program. The researcher found this interesting given Catherine had admitted she might not collaboratively reflect without accountability measures in place. Unfortunately, none of the other TAs responded to Catherine's post.

From the researcher's perspective, Catherine seemed to understand the value of reflective teaching practices despite her comments about not initially understanding the purpose of reflection. Her digital survey indicated she was somewhat comfortable with her practices. Catherine engaged in her reflective practices by holding regular discussions with her supervising teacher, connecting classroom reflection with her graduate coursework, and seeking peers' input on the professional development topics covered in the training program. Catherine's survey explained that the collaborative reflection experience cultivated a learning community focused on collaborative exchanges and peer support throughout the entire training process.

#### *4.1.4 Judith*

The researcher had limited interaction with Judith given the demands of her PhD program and her general absence at the IEP. Judith did not participate in the survey and interview conducted by the researcher. While cordial and willing to interact with other TAs, Judith occasionally seemed uninterested during the discussions of the in-person meetings. Her contributions did offer a unique perspective for the TA group because she is a non-native speaker herself. At times, Judith offered her reflections on the differences between her experiences



teaching a homogeneous EFL student roster versus the variety encountered in an ESL setting. Judith completed three of the four blog posts and attended all of the in-person meetings.

#### *4.1.5 Lucy*

Before entering the MATESL program, Lucy held a job which involved frequent interactions with international students. She always enjoyed the opportunity to chat with them and help them adapt to U.S. culture. Lucy's undergraduate time abroad in Spain and China also motivated her to consider career paths that would enable her to live abroad again. To Lucy, the field of ESL/EFL studies seemed to be the most logical choice, and she has enthusiastically embraced the MATEESL program and her TA role at the IEP. After graduating from the MATESL program, Lucy and her husband have plans to teach somewhere in Asia.

Lucy was another novice TA who participated in a co-teaching practicum as appointed by the Director. For the Fall 2015 semester, Lucy was paired with a veteran teacher (Enora) who had over 20 years of experience in the field. They co-taught an intermediate listening-speaking course, but Lucy took over the independent teaching a few weeks sooner in the semester than Ashley did; this was based primarily on the supervising style of Lucy's CT rather than Lucy's skill level. Even though some novice teachers may be overwhelmed by the learning curve, the researcher believed Lucy's calm demeanor proved an asset to a smoother transition into her teaching role. Lucy was consistently involved in discussions but usually in a more reserved manner.

Given the Fall 2015 semester was Lucy's initiation into teaching, she had not previously participated in reflective journaling. Yet, throughout the collaborative reflection, Lucy faithfully responded to all four prompts and attended all in-person meetings. She mentioned one minor logistical hiccup in uploading her professional development plan to the blog but otherwise found

the blog to be a good, easy-to-use tool. Interestingly, both Lucy's survey and her interview indicated that she perceived too much overlap in the content of the blog posts and the meetings. Perhaps influenced by her novice experience level, Lucy believed increased collaborative reflection would have been beneficial. She expanded upon this by noting the additional activity should be either the online or in-person but not a combination of both.

In general, Lucy's survey and interview indicated she was the least enthusiastic about the collaborative reflection process but still considered the TA community as valuable. Lucy was somewhat comfortable with her reflective teaching practices but was unsure about the role the blog played in the development of her practices. For her, reflective practices included conversations with her supervising teacher as well as lesson plans annotated with her thoughts on the successes and areas for improvement. The researcher detected that Lucy did not doubt her ability to collaborate with peers. Lucy seemed to thrive in the community building by calmly offering a listening ear and brainstorming solutions to problems she and her peers encountered.

#### *4.1.6 Muriel*

At the time of the digital survey, Muriel had been in the field of ESL/EFL for 10 years. She has her PhD in Education and ESL and has always taught her native language, English. She has studied Spanish and Arabic to degrees where she said she was highly proficient and had good working knowledge, respectively. Muriel came to the IEP as Director a few weeks before the Fall semester of 2014. She has policies to be transparent about administrative decisions for the IEP and always encouraged the IEP staff to pursue professional development opportunities.

Regarding Muriel's own professional development activities, Muriel was pursuing leadership coursework specific to the field of TESL. She dedicates a significant amount of time reading professional literature on models that enable intensive language programs to integrate

skills. Muriel is also interested in professional literature on the subject of supervising language teachers as this was one of her primary responsibilities as Director of the IEP.

Muriel considered reflective teaching practices as important and shared her own practices. Mostly the practices involved annotation of lesson plans as soon as possible after teaching. She also annotates books or articles she is reading and focuses on how they connect to her professional experiences. In her 10 years of teaching, Muriel did have experience with reflective journaling. The reflections were included as part of an annual reflective portfolio built to analyze her teaching practices and assess her professional growth. This was an individual endeavor that was done as a hard copy, which made the use of the blog for collaborative reflection novel for her.

Interestingly, Muriel identified numerous communities where she considered herself a member. These communities ranged from professional groups that meet in-person, such as the Network of Intensive English Program Administrators, to the technology-based communities of the TESOL daily blog or Twitter community.

Muriel initially expressed her doubts about the use of a blog for the collaborative reflection training. Her skepticism stemmed from her previously unsuccessful experience building an online learning community. In general, Muriel was pleasantly surprised at the level of the TAs' engagement and the thoughtful reflections. She dedicated time to commenting and reviewing the content of each TAs' contributions and engaged regularly within the collaborative blog space. This active guidance and feedback from Muriel extended into the in-person meetings as well.

Given Muriel's interest in professional development and teacher supervision, this reflection model for TA training offered a unique opportunity. Her interests showed through her

enthusiasm and encouragement of the TAs. Muriel genuinely cared about the process and results of the TAs' training and invested a significant amount of time to implement something new. The overall results provided her some important insights that she could apply in future iterations of the training. Undoubtedly, her creativity will lead to additional improvements and strengthen future trainings to produce even better results.

**Research question #1: What were the results of exposing TAs to reflective practices through the collaborative reflection model?**

**4.2 The collaborative reflection experience**

*4.2.1 Overall impressions*

The first insights into overall impressions about the collaborative reflection experience came from the Fall 2015 New TA Feedback survey (Fall survey). All five of the TAs participated in the survey because the Director administered it at the end of Fall 2015 semester at the end of the training cycle. The survey responses provided insights about the new training program that the TAs completed, and it had some specific focus on the collaborative reflection blog and meetings. Following the chronological order of the data collection, analysis of the digital surveys and in-person interviews are presented after the Fall survey responses.

In the Fall survey, three questions covered the impressions of the collaborative reflection experience, the use of the blog as a training resource, and the extended semester program. The questions, Likert scale explanations, and the quantity of each response can be viewed in Table 4. The survey directions were to rate the topic in each question using the given Likert scale.

Table 4

*Questions and responses from the Fall 2015 New TA Feedback survey*

Question	Likert scale	# of each response
#2 The collaborative reflection blog	Very helpful	1
	Somewhat helpful	3
	Neutral	1
	Somewhat unhelpful	0
	Very unhelpful	0
#4 Using a Wordpress site to keep the semester timeline, materials, and requirements accessible	Very helpful	3
	Somewhat helpful	2
	Neutral	0
	Somewhat unhelpful	0
	Very unhelpful	0
#10 A semester-long approach to new TA support	Very helpful	5
	Somewhat helpful	0
	Neutral	0
	Somewhat unhelpful	0
	Very unhelpful	0

Question #2 asked TAs to share an overall impression about the collaborative reflection blog.

The Likert scale ranged included: very unhelpful, somewhat unhelpful, neutral, somewhat helpful, and very helpful. Four of the five TAs rated the collaborative reflection blog experience as somewhat helpful or very helpful; one TA was neutral about the overall experience. Also from the Fall survey, Question #4 used the same 5-point Likert scale and showed that all five of the TAs found the WordPress site somewhat or very helpful as an accessible resource for the semester-long training. The WordPress site had consolidated training materials and enabled asynchronous access for everyone. Question #10 also used the helpful/unhelpful Likert scale and showed that all five of the TAs found the extension of TA support beyond the pre-semester onboarding was very helpful. Overall, these results showed the TAs' held a positive view of the collaborative reflection experience. Holistically, they found the collaborative reflection helpful

for practical training purposes and considered the blog itself as a valuable resource for training materials and connections. Because this semester-long training approach was new, the TAs' responses offered optimistic insights regarding the utility of this training design. The only exception to this positive feedback from the Fall survey was the one TA who remained neutral in response to the overall impression of the collaborative reflection blog. With the responses being anonymous, it is unclear who held this opinion or why.

The researcher gained deeper insight into the TAs' opinions about the collaborative reflection experience from the digital surveys and the in-person interviews. TAs' explanations demonstrated how they interpreted the training differently. First, Ashley and Lucy discussed the infrastructure of the collaborative reflection experience. Ashley considered the blog prompts to be well-structured while simultaneously open-ended. According to Ashley, blogging was a "good exercise" because the process "guided her thinking but also allowed me to see the perspectives of my peers." These comments from Ashley aligned with Maarof's (2007) recommendation for administrators to carefully design reflection prompts. Lucy offered a less enthusiastic explanation when asked about her overall impression; she felt there were weaknesses in the structure. Lucy specified, "I think that I would have liked further discussion...maybe more...requiring us to comment on someone else's blog." Furthermore, Lucy's survey indicated her dissatisfaction with the quantity of interactions on the blog. She called for added "interaction either online or face-to-face but not necessarily an increase in both." Lucy and Ashley both mentioned a desire for increased interactions, but their status as novice teachers may have overestimated the value of that. Such a call for required interactions contradicts Hobbs' (2007) warning to administrators; she cautioned requiring too much of the reflective participants. These diverging opinions are reminders to the researcher and other

administrators that preferred training methods and the overall collaborative reflection influence perceptions about the efficacy of the experience.

Second, Catherine, Anne, and Ashley felt motivated by the social and practical aspects offered through the hybrid reflection. Catherine thought the collaborative reflection to be a “worthwhile and bonding experience for new TAs...getting comments from my coworkers and our director was encouraging and helpful.” The interview with Catherine confirmed that she found the whole process enjoyable and particularly appreciated the interaction enabled through the blog: “[I liked] being able to read other people’s responses and...respond to those online.” Anne also appreciated seeing her peers’ responses to the different prompts. Anne acknowledged she had not previously participated in the blogging process, either individually or collaboratively. Yet, Anne held similar opinions and used the same verbiage of “enjoying” the overall experience with the blog as a collaborative tool. Ashley felt the exposure to new perspectives from peer TAs and the Director gave her extra support as a teacher with limited background in the field. Overall, the TAs’ increased access to unique perspectives and input was appreciated and seemed to be a pleasant, productive experience. This positive feedback about the collaborative reflection enabling exposure to diverse perspectives was similar to participant feedback in other studies (see Duncan-Howell, 2010; Chen, 2012; and Reich et al., 2011).

#### *4.2.2 The influence of the collaborative reflection*

Through the digital survey and interviews, the researcher asked the TAs to consider if and how the collaborative reflection process influenced them professionally. Table 5 outlines the question details related to the influence of this collaborative reflection experience.

Table 5

*Questions related to the influence of the collaborative reflection*

Source	Question
Digital survey	#15 Did the collaborative journal entries and discussions affect your thoughts or analysis of your own teaching practices? If so, please describe how.
Digital survey	#17 Describe your overall impression and/or thoughts about the IEP TA collaborative journal blog experience.
Interview	#3 How did the collaborative journal entries influence you?

Only three of the four TAs responded to the open-ended Question #15 of the digital survey: “Did the collaborative journal entries and discussions affect your thoughts or analysis of your own teaching? If so, please describe how.” From Ashley’s perspective as a novice teacher, the reflective process improved her awareness of trends in the field and enabled her to connect past experiences with her own future teaching decisions (Farrell, 2012). Specifically, Ashley said the blog prompts and discussions “helped bridge the gap between my previous pre-teaching experiences and the things I would need to think about and become aware of heading into my first year of teaching.” Although Catherine was a TA with years of teaching experience, she echoed Ashley’s thought that the reflection topics facilitated her thoughts about “what it takes to be a teacher.” For those two TAs, at least, the collaborative reflection inspired more conscious effort to connect theoretical foundations and personal learning experience with their own teaching decisions.

Even though Anne had an incomplete answer to Question #15 on her survey, her interview included her understanding of the collaborative reflection’s function in terms of short- and long-term professional development. Anne thought the reflection was focused on “techniques and methods” for the short-term. However, Anne also felt the collaborative



reflection had energized her to “focus more on looking at the bigger picture and holistically. Like what do these experiences tell me about my teaching beliefs as- as those things kind of changed. And that’s something that I didn’t do in the past.” Arshavskaya and Whitney (2014) had argued that reflective writing could help teachers learn more about their own beliefs, and Anne’s remarks served as support for that. On the other hand, Lucy perceived the reflective process to help more with exposure to important concepts about second language teaching rather than influencing her personal self-reflection practices. Three of the TAs thought the collaborative reflection shaped their short-term development, but Anne’s thought dedicated to change and growth supported the idea that reflection could play a longer-lasting role in one’s professional development (Alterio, 2004). In order to assess the longer-term effects, future longitudinal research could offer additional understanding.

Three of the four TAs also perceived their reflective engagement increased interaction and comfort in discussing topics with IEP colleagues other than the TAs. Similar to the participants of the Krukta et al. (2014) study, Catherine, Ashley, and Anne all appreciated the increased opportunities for professional interactions and discussions. For example, Catherine felt she bonded with her peers as “professionals not just like hanging out during happy hour, but...actually talking about work related stuff.” Ashley extended ideas from the reflective activities into her regular meetings with her CT. She specifically remembered that they had discussions about technology in the classroom and professional development, but she couldn’t remember if they had been inspired by the reflective discussions. It is important to note that Ashley was one of the two TAs who participated in the additional practicum. Thus, Ashley could not distinguish the true influence of that mentoring relationship from the blog’s influence, but she believed the overlap in discussion content indicated the relevance of the “topics that were

deserving of our [the TAs'] attention.” At the highest level of collegial interactions, Ashley and Anne felt that the IEP’s Director, Muriel, was accessible through the process and provided frequent feedback that validated the TAs participation (Golombek & Johnson, 2004).

Finally, the collaborative reflection demonstrated how a blog and meetings could serve as a platform for the TAs to share beliefs and techniques with each other. All four of the TAs who were interviewed believed the collaborative reflection instigated open sharing among the TAs in training. Being one of the TAs with the least amount of experience, Ashley was initially intimidated to contribute because she felt unsure about the contributions she could make. However, Ashley recalled an example from a meeting discussion when she shared a classroom management technique about minimizing distractions: “I also...remember talking about a tactic that my co-teacher and I were using. And uh, some of the other teachers had commented on the- on that being a good idea.” This validation seemed to boost her confidence in sharing with her peers. Ashley’s boost in confidence was rooted in the reflective practices in which she participated (Farrell, 2012; Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

Catherine concurred that the collaborative reflection became a space to ask each other for advice on teaching ideas (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). More specifically, Catherine found that the sharing had positively influenced her teaching because she learned from the array of teaching and language learning experiences held by the other TAs. Catherine said, “Being able to compare my teaching style and strategies with my coworkers was incredibly beneficial.” In her interview, Anne discussed that she found the specific “tips and tricks” offered by others to be motivating and enjoyable (Chen, 2012). For Lucy, Muriel’s facilitation during in-person meetings involved not only guiding the discussion but also sharing new teaching resources and ideas. Simultaneously, Lucy found the TAs could “bounce a lot of ideas off each other for the things

that we should be doing and resources that are on campus to help us do those things.” Whether the sharing came from peers or the reflection facilitator (Muriel), the TAs valued the collaboration.

In summary, only one of the four TAs, Lucy, critiqued the overall experience with collaborative reflection. She thought her reflective practices had changed, but she did not correlate those changes directly with the blog. That being said, it seemed that the TAs found the collaborative reflection established an environment that supported exploration of new ideas while also guiding those who were less experienced in teaching (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Vygotsky, 1987). The experience also served as a catalyst for sharing of resources and emotions and aided in the formation of a learning community (Hur & Brush, 2009; Levin, 2000). Most importantly, within that community, the TAs perceived their exchanges were well-received by peers and the Director. This validation was valuable both for encouraging participation in professional development activities and reflective teaching practices.

#### **4.3 Understanding reflective teaching practices**

The TAs offered generally positive feedback about their collaborative reflection at the surface level, but a deeper look into the TAs’ understanding of reflective teaching practices showed some dissimilarities. There were some common elements that appeared across the TAs’ definitions of reflective practices. Yet, closer analysis from a programmatic standpoint revealed some missed opportunities for explicit training on reflection as a concept. The TAs’ varied understanding also influenced their interpretations of their own reflective teaching practices as well as the value they could provide. Table 6 outlines the digital survey and interview questions that focused on the topic of reflective teaching practices.

Table 6  
*Questions related to reflective teaching practices*

Source	Question
Digital Survey	#11 How would you define reflective teaching practices? Feel free to write as much as you deem necessary.
Digital Survey	#12 On a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important), rate the importance of reflective teaching practices.
Digital Survey	#13 Do you have reflective teaching practices? If so, describe them.
Digital Survey	#14 On a scale of 1 (not comfortable at all) to 5 (very comfortable), rate how comfortable you are with your reflective teaching practices.
Interview	#2 What are your reflective teaching practices and how have they changed over the semester?
Interview	#3 How did the collaborative journal entries influence you?

#### *4.3.1 Common elements in the definitions of reflective teaching practices*

One key goal of the collaborative reflective training was to expose TAs to reflective teaching practices as a professional development activity. On the TAs' digital survey, Question #11 asked TAs to provide their definition of reflective teaching practices. This was Question #12 on the Director's digital survey. The variations in the TAs' definitions matched what Hatton and Smith (1995) observed as a flexibility in the definition of reflection. Yet, there were some common elements across the TAs' definitions. They included: internal or self-evaluation, connections to pedagogical theories and motivation, and improvement of practice. First, three of the four TAs mentioned terms related to internal or self-evaluation. One TA, Ashley, mentioned the importance of being mindful. In her survey, Ashley said, "reflective teaching practices require us to be mindful of our teaching," and the idea of mindfulness was later echoed during

her interview. Ashley expanded on her understanding of the term mindfulness during the interview by saying it should be paired with active follow-up and adaptation for future teaching. Another similar prefix, “self,” was found in the definitions from Lucy and Anne’s surveys. Lucy discussed reflective teaching practices to be self-evaluation of one’s teaching, while Anne described the practices as involving self-observation. Anne seemed to advocate for teachers to “identify and challenge our practice and beliefs so that we can improve our teaching.” This collective approach with her use of “our” and “we” was intriguing. While still focused on self, it seemed as though Anne was calling on peers to participate as part of the greater teacher community. Question #13 later in the survey asked TAs to discuss their personal reflective teaching practices if the TAs felt that had such practices. The opportunity to discuss personal practices may have created a clearer reason to separate the “we” and “I” while Anne completed the survey. Regardless of Anne’s reason, her definition was indeed different because it demonstrated a definition through a community lens, which will be discussed with additional detail later.

The second common element in the definitions was related to pedagogical theories and motivation. Still in response to Question #11 of the digital survey, two of the four TAs mentioned those elements. Although Catherine was the outlier by not discussing internal or self-evaluation, she did discuss that teachers should use theory and training as a guide to their internal evaluation. Anne took another approach when she said self-observation should involve analysis of one’s motivations for specific practices to determine which practices are effective or ineffective. Ashley and Lucy indirectly referenced teaching principles when describing how teachers should think through successes and challenges but neither mentioned what standards or tools they could implement during their reflection.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, three of the TAs' definitions included elements related to improvement of teaching. Reflecting has value on its own, but acting upon those reflective thoughts is where teachers can influence their students' experiences in the classroom. As Farrell (2012) and Richards and Lockhart (1994) mentioned, reflective practices can aid teachers in developing the approaches they will use to adjust their teaching decisions. In her survey, Anne defined reflective teaching practices as a continual process to improve one's teaching. She recognized that reflection was something that needed to occur frequently (Richards and Lockhart, 1994). Ashley's definition also said these practices require us to "think about what we are doing and how we can improve." The definition from Lucy also mentioned adaptations of teaching practices. Yet, more distinctly, Lucy said, "Reflective teaching is concerned with how to become a better teacher and meet the needs of the students." This inclusion of students shows Lucy's view on the connections within the bigger picture and was probably one of the most comprehensive definitions in that it extended beyond self.

From the data the researcher had, the Director did not share her definition of reflective teaching practices until the digital survey. Her definition was: "The process of taking the time to analyze current practice and think about what has happened and then think about the 'why' behind what has happened. This can take on many forms. Reflective teaching practices is a deliberate activity." It was interesting that this definition differed so greatly from those that the TAs provided. There was no specific reference to "self" nor was there a direct reference to theory or principles. The use of "analyze" and "deliberate activity" did indicate that reflection was a process that required time and energy, which most of the other TAs seemed to understand. One general concern from the researcher is that the definitions were not clearly defined at the beginning of the collaborative reflection process and created an array of responses from the TAs.

These concerns were similar to those from Krutka et al. (2014) who found their participants did not produce in-depth reflections until Krutka et al. intervened and re-explained reflection. Krutka et al. said they would be more emphatic about their descriptions of reflection's purpose and value in future iterations of collaborative reflection. This will be discussed in detail in the subsequent section. The researcher understood the definitions did not need to be exactly the same; instead, this was a possible area of improvement for future iterations of the training program.

#### *4.3.2 Missed opportunities*

Interestingly, the inconsistencies across the TAs' definitions add another layer to the complexity of defining reflective teaching practices. Some research (e.g. Chen, 2012; Farrell, 2012; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Krutka et al., 2014; Maarof, 2007; Richards, 1998) argued these differences in the definition of reflection are natural given the manifestations of reflection are largely dependent on an individual's behavior, context, teaching experience, and/or motivation. However, it is noteworthy that while the hybrid training utilized the nomenclature of reflection. The concept itself was not clearly outlined as a goal of the training nor was it defined during the four blog posts and meetings. Furthermore, the face-to-face meetings did not include any explicit discussion of reflective teaching practices either. The only indirect reference from the collaborative reflection meetings was the Director's comment at the beginning of the first meeting: "Thank you so much for participating in the online journal. I think this is a great idea just to- share ideas and what you're seeing and get your thoughts on paper. Well, metaphorical paper." It is possible the Director clarified the definition and purpose of collaborative reflection during pre-semester orientation for the TAs, but the researcher did not have access to this data.

The researcher noted the presentation of reflection as a concept was rather subtle throughout the data. There were only a few derivations of the word "reflect" and each was

indirect about the concept. One such indirect reference was the title of the WordPress blog, which can be seen in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Screenshot from the blog’s home page showing the blog title and navigation menu.

The title of “Developing ESL Professionals: Reflective Practitioning” may have sent subliminal messaging when TAs logged into the blog. It might have been more meaningful if complemented by a definition of reflective practtitioning. Until the researcher’s digital survey in the semester following training, TAs were not asked to provide their own definition of reflective teaching practices. This question was presented through the digital survey administered by the researcher.

Another indirect reference to reflection occurred on the Welcome Page of the blog (Figure 2). The page contained a brief note designating the online space as a collaborative reflection journal to be used with other TAs.



# Hello world!

---

ON **AUGUST 26, 2015** / BY ' ' / IN **UNCATEGORIZED** / **EDIT**

Welcome to the Online Reflection Journal. This is a place for you to collaboratively reflect with your fellow teachers through your first semester with the IEL.

Happy blogging!



Be the first to like this.

*Figure 2.* Screenshot from the Welcome Page on the blog.

This page utilized the reflection nomenclature but did not present the general definition or even one intended for use in this specific training context. Even the Post Criteria page, which outlined the specific guidelines for the TAs' blog posts, did not host an explanation of reflection (see Figure 3).

---

# Post Criteria

Please use the guidelines below when posting:

## **Ideas/Content:**

- Connect insights to your MA/PhD coursework and current understanding of TESL to your observations and/or co-teaching experiences.
- Share pertinent (not random or obvious) resources or teaching ideas for peers.
- Share issues, problems, and possibilities.
- **Include 1-2 questions regarding your experience at the end of each post.**

## **Voice/Word Choice:**

- Professional, respectful tone appropriate for audience and purpose
- Use vibrant, compelling first-person (I/we)
- Use language related to ESL instruction
- Make every word count!

*Figure 3. Screenshot of the Post Criteria page from the blog.*

Drawing attention to the definition of reflection through the homepage or at least the Post Criteria page may contextualize the conversations and help focus trainees' attention on the tasks at hand. In the Krutka et al. (2014) study, there was one implication that facilitators of reflection should clarify the concept of reflection and its purpose. They believed that clarification could improve the quality of reflection within a collaborative space. The missed opportunities to define reflection on this study's blog should be considered when future administrators design their reflective training.

### *4.3.3 Personal examples of reflective teaching practices*

Given the unique personalities and backgrounds of each TA, there were diverse interpretations and approaches with their personal reflective teaching practices. This was not surprising given the variance of practices Hatton and Smith (1995) observed in their study; the

created categories to provide structure to classification. The researcher of this study has grouped the TAs' descriptions of practices in a similar manner.

To frame the conversation in terms of the TAs' comfort with their reflective practices, one can look to Question #14 from the digital survey. This question asked the TAs to rate their comfort level with their own practices on a Likert scale of 1 being not comfortable at all to 5 being very comfortable. Three of the four TAs only felt somewhat comfortable with their practices. Anne was the outlier and said she was somewhat uncomfortable; interestingly, Anne was the only one with previous reflective journaling experience. In her digital survey response to Question #13: "Do you have reflective teaching practices?", Anne said, "I enjoy keeping a teaching diary of my thoughts/reactions/ideas of class but to my chagrin, have not been keeping as detailed of a diary this semester." Researchers (see Arshavaskaya & Whitney, 2014; Borg, 2006) encouraged teachers to do use reflective journal writing to help them put reflective thoughts into action in the classroom. However, the reasons why Anne was no longer keeping a detailed diary were unclear.

The most commonly mentioned reflective teaching practice was annotation or note taking, which Ashley, Lucy, and Anne all explained. Richards and Lockhart (1994) described these as lesson reports. Ashley took the approach of printing all lesson plans and taking copious notes on them to track the things that worked and/or needed adaptation. With so many notes, Ashley compiles each lesson plan into large binders for her reference both during the semester and for the future. However, Ashley's frequent note taking did not stop in the office. She shared that some thoughts might occur to her while she was riding the bus or at times when she was not in her teaching office, so she utilized her iPhone notepad app to keep "a running list" of those thoughts. For Lucy, discussions with her CT prompted her reflective thoughts that she sometimes

later annotated. Lucy felt her interactive reflective teaching practices could be attributed to her work with her CT, Enora. Lucy and Enora spent a good deal of time talking through their reflection during the co-teaching phase of the novice teacher practicum. After Lucy transitioned into independent teaching, however, she began “jotting notes down” on lesson plans. She would use written notes to consult with her co-teacher. Anne’s description of her annotation of weekly class plans seemed quite in-depth in terms of the notes’ contents:

I jot down...a few descriptions of what the students excelled or struggled with. If there was a particularly successful activity (or a particularly unsuccessful one) I usually try to draw a sketch of the classroom layout with details of where students were grouped, and then small notes with students names (e.g. Altar took 8 min with 3 min speaking task, then Aldanah spoke 4 min) in chronological order.

Even within the common practice of annotation, these three TAs had varied approaches. Ashley’s notes seemed more of reminders for herself, while Lucy’s brief notes served as discussion points with her co-teacher. The thorough approach Anne took with her analysis seemed quite student-focused; this was a distinguishing factor.

Besides the annotations TAs might make, TAs mentioned collegial discussions (Farrell, 1999) as one of their reflective practices. Contrary to what Brannan and Bleistein (2012) suggested, the TAs did not need to be instructed about the value of those peer discussions. Anne shared her fondness of getting feedback from other teachers. She found that troubleshooting activities or discussing specific language skills helped her “notice particular patterns (both positive and negative)” of her teaching style. From Catherine’s point of view, the majority of her reflection occurred during meetings with her supervising teacher. She described her supervisor as “hands off,” which prompted Catherine to nominate their topics in discussions: “whenever I

bring something to her it's something I really kinda wanna hash out and get feedback from her about." Anne and Catherine had different reasons for engaging in discussions, but they were both seeking answers and/or initiating discussions on their own. This is dissimilar to Lucy's situation as a novice teacher because her co-teacher seemed to guide her through the discussions; Lucy filled in those gaps by taking notes until she could meet with her co-teacher again. Anne and Catherine's previous teaching experiences may have contributed to their willingness to take more initiative in having reflective discussions.

#### *4.3.4 Discussing the value of (collaborative) reflection*

Researchers (see Germain-Rutherford, 2015; Krutka et al., 2014) stressed the importance of communicating the potential value and benefits of collaborative reflection. Most of the TAs from this study were new to collaborative reflection, and they did not seem to understand the full importance of the practices. From the Fall survey, two of the five TAs said they had previous experience with reflective journaling before the IEP's training program. This was consistent with the digital survey responses to Question #16 which showed three of the four TAs had not done reflective journaling. Anne was the only one of the four interviewed TAs who had engaged in reflective journaling with previous teaching positions. She explained this in detail in her digital survey and interview. This experience was easily identified through Anne's in-depth comments and thoughtful attitude toward reflection. Anne's positive attitude toward the reflective component of the TA training seemed to reinforce the utility of reflection for her, and the unique collaborative nature enriched her experience with reflection. Yet, less sophisticated discussion points about reflection from the novice TA, Ashley, still showed the potential of collaborative reflection training has to raise awareness. Ashley credited the blogging process and meetings for raising her awareness about the importance of reflection. Perhaps more importantly, Ashley

learned the significance of taking action on reflective thoughts. However, the training left Catherine with a desire for a clearer understanding about the benefits of collaborative reflection; she did not feel that was directly addressed at any point. This desire for an explanation of reflection corroborated the missed opportunities for defining reflection. She also said she had wished for more encouragement to post beyond the required four prompts. The researcher followed up on this comment during Catherine's interview. Catherine said:

I don't know if we talked about...the purpose of the blog...I don't know I feel like maybe it...I'm trying to think of the word like it would have been impressed upon me how valuable it is. Then I would have like wanted to continue to do it after the [blog] assignment period was done. Like we would have continued to- like the momentum wouldn't have stopped.

Germain-Rutherford (2015) suggested that participants must perceive value in the reflective process before administrators would see increased engagement in reflection. As Krutka et al. (2014) believed, clarifying and emphasizing this value at the beginning of the collaborative reflection process would influence the participants' ability to have meaningful discussions. Catherine's comment suggested she knew reflection was a valuable practice but perhaps made that discovery late in the training process. It is noteworthy that Catherine used "we" when discussing continuation of the reflection; this seemed to show her belief in the collaborative aspect of the reflection and what it could provide for future accountability and encouragement to maintain the practices. Catherine's comments seemed to align with Brannan and Bleistein's (2012) idea that an understanding of the benefits of reflection could motivate those who are reflecting to be more accountable for themselves. Anne, on the other hand, discussed how the collaborative approach established a sense of accountability. Based on her previous reflective

experiences, which were done individually, Anne thought it would have been beneficial for the supervisors to encourage collaboration or follow-up to improve accountability. She recognized the influence of a community mentality and how it could influence self-accountability (Brannan and Bleistein, 2012). Lucy's thorough definition of reflective teaching practices showed a strong understanding of the concept, but most of her commentary in the digital survey and interview did not illustrate how much value she found in reflection.

Overall, without an explicit definition of reflection present on the blog or meeting transcripts, it is understandable that there is variance in the TAs' understandings of reflection and reflective teaching practices. The varied definitions did not seem to influence the TAs' thoughts about the importance of reflection; three of the four TAs still considered reflective teaching practices as very important according to the digital surveys. Catherine was the only one to say the practices are somewhat important. Perhaps discussing the meaning and importance of reflective teaching would help future TA trainees to have increased stake in this important part of professional development. Additionally, such discussions could help TAs come to their own conclusions about the value of reflection and help them brainstorm individualized methods that are convenient and operational for them within their specific contexts (Farrell, 2012).

## **Research question #2: What were the advantages and disadvantages of a hybrid collaborative reflection model?**

This study revealed both advantages and disadvantages to the hybrid collaborative reflection model. Research from Hagan (2007) and Matzat (2013) shared what potential benefits could develop when in-person and online interactions were blended together, but the current study only realized some of them. The hybrid approach used in this TA training program blended

both asynchronous, online reflective activity with in-person meetings to start or continue discussions. Table 7 shows the sequencing, topics, and prompts of the four blog posts and meetings.

Table 7  
*Blog and meeting sequencing and topics*

	Blog/ Meeting first	Topic	Prompt
#1	Blog	Classroom Observations	Describe and evaluate how the teacher you observed explicitly addressed students' (Reading/Grammar/Listening/Speaking/Writing) skills.
#2	Meeting	Technology in the Classroom	What teaching/learning tool or program do you find most intriguing? Why? (If you choose something not covered in the presentation, please include a link/explanation.)
#3	Blog	Classroom Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is one positive experience you have had with classroom management so far (or have you observed)? How has this helped you? How has it helped the students?</li> <li>• In terms of classroom management, what is one challenge you are currently facing? What strategy/strategies 1) have you tried so far, or 2) are you thinking of trying?</li> </ul>
#4	Meeting	Professional Development	On Friday, we will be creating your tailored professional development timeline for the remainder of the academic year. Think about the things you will need to do or would like to do between now and May. Following the session, I'll ask that each of you upload your drafted timeline to the website under your profile page.



Each topic was aligned with specific milestones during the TAs' first semester with the IEP. In the first two weeks of the semester, the TAs observed who were more experienced instructors. The first blog post and meeting was a way for the TAs to share observation reports with each other. Sharing continued during the meeting as the TAs critiqued what they observed and promoted what they deemed good practices. For the second topic, the meeting preceded the post and was led by a guest facilitator, Enora, the IEP's resident technology expert. Enora led a discussion about the value and risks of using technology in the classroom and wrapped up by explaining tools that could be implemented in the TAs' classes; she tailored suggestions by various subject (grammar, writing, etc.). This discussion led TAs into a blog entry where they identified a tech tool of interest for their technology presentations that would occur later in the semester. Third, the topic of classroom management aligned with the mid-semester student feedback cycle. TAs had received student feedback, reflected on it, and then wrote posts related to their successes and challenges to prepare for teaching the remainder of the semester. The fourth and final topic of professional development pushed TAs to reflect on the full scope of what they had learned and to make future plans. Each TA shared their professional development timeline in a format of their choosing.

#### **4.4 The blog**

##### *4.4.1 Engagement by the numbers*

The quantifiable blog data provided insight into the actual engagement of each of the TAs and the Director. Table 8 outlines the overall activity including the number of posts the TAs made. There were four possible prompts in total. Comments occurred when one TA responded to one another's posts, and likes came from a button that could be used to show approval or support.

Table 8  
*Overall activity on the blog*

	# posts (of 4)	# comments to others' posts*	# likes*
Anne	2	1	0
Ashley	4	1	13
Catherine	4	1	3
Judith	3	0	0
Lucy	4	0	0
Muriel	N/A	7	16

\*Some TAs placed their professional plans on the biography pages of the blog. The like and comment features were unavailable on those pages.

Muriel utilized the comment and like features more than anyone, but this seemed to be a way for her to validate TAs' responses and/or provide additional insight (Golombek & Johnson, 2004).

Ashley, Catherine, and Lucy completed all four prompts. Despite this accomplishment, there was relatively limited engagement with commenting on others' blog posts. Ashley was certainly the most active in terms of using the like feature with 13 total likes, yet the simplicity of this feature may not hold as much weight in the overall value gained or added. Nonetheless, it showed that Ashley took advantage of the asynchronous access to review her peers' thoughts. Catherine also utilized the like feature but only three times. Anne, Catherine, and Ashley all commented at least once on another TAs' blog post, but Anne's overall contribution of two of the four posts was the lowest of the five TAs. It is thought provoking that Anne, who held such positive views about the collaborative reflection and the opportunity to continue such practices, was the one with the least amount of involvement. However, Anne's reasons for limited engagement remained unclear. Lucy did not utilize the comment or like capabilities, which is intriguing given her desire to augment the interactions either in person or online. During her interview, Lucy recommended a requirement for commenting:

I think I would have liked a requirement of commenting on one other person's post cause I honestly didn't read- more like skimmed through everyone else's blog posts. And if I had been required to read through one and then comment, I probably would have read through them more thoroughly.

Incorporating a comment requirement may prove useful for future iterations of this collaborative reflection experience. Although as Hobbs (2007) pointed out, there are risks associated with too many requirements for reflection. The main risk is decreased engagement on the blog. When there is a supplementary training requirement such as the collaborative reflection from this study, decisions about program design must be carefully weighed while keeping in mind the specific training context.

Taking a more in-depth look at the posts themselves, the researcher used word counts to see how much content the TAs were posting. The data in Table 9 excludes an evaluation of the quality of each post as measured by the Post Criteria, which is discussed later. Post #4 did not involve a blog post as the TAs shared their professional development plans in various formats; therefore, it is not included.

Table 9  
*Word counts from the blog entries*

	Average	Anne	Ashley	Catherine	Judith	Lucy
Post #1	328.2	285	425	319	285	327
Post #2	200.5	351	177	129	0	145
Post #3	294.75	0	263	292	257	367
TA average		318	288.3	246.7	271	279.7

Anne, who only completed two of the posts, had the highest average word count with 318 words. Judith's average of 271 words was fourth highest overall, but she only completed three of the posts. Among the three TAs (Ashley, Catherine, and Lucy) who completed all four posts, Ashley had the highest average word count with 288.3 words. This was closely followed by Lucy's 279.7 average words. Catherine had 246.7 average words, which was the lowest of the three who consistently participated in all posts.

Ashley's high average word count made sense given her diligent work ethic. With her novice teacher status, Ashley reveled in the sharing of information and was thorough in her own posts. Perhaps this was her way of addressing the challenge she encountered with the collaborative reflection experience: "I found it somewhat challenging given the lack of experience I had coming into this environment." Lucy had her highest word count of 367 on the entry about classroom management. Given Lucy's participation in the practicum with a co-teacher, her insights may have been more thorough because such discussions on the topic were already occurring regularly with her co-teacher. Anne seemed most excited about the technology in the classroom blog, and this was not surprising given her eagerness and experience with integrating technology into her lessons. Catherine, Ashley, and Lucy wrote significantly less for prompt #2, which may be explained by two things. First, the prompt really only asked the TAs to identify tools that may be of interest and the reasons why. It designed to prepare the TAs for their future technology presentation. Second, they may not have experimented with the tool enough to share more details.

#### *4.4.2 Meeting the post criteria*

To establish standards for the collaborative blog, Muriel drew inspiration from Krutka et al.'s (2014) study on the social networking platform, Edmodo. Krutka et al. shared posting

criteria they used to guide their student teachers' participation through collaborative reflection. Muriel adapted the criteria for her reflective training component and posted it on the blog to guide the TAs. The list was on an individual page dedicated to the criteria (see Appendix K). Instructions on the first blog prompt asked TAs to review the Post Criteria, and the prompt included a link to the Criteria page. The Post Criteria page was not linked to each of the subsequent posts nor was it discussed in detail throughout the meetings. In the first meeting, Muriel reiterated the criteria of adding questions to the end of each post; those questions were intended to drive the conversations in the debrief meetings and on the blog. However, as was already shown, the TAs were unsuccessful in returning frequently to comment on the blog.

The researcher used specific points from the blog's Post Criteria as a quality standard given the criteria were intended to establish guidelines for interactions on the blog (Preece, 2004). From Muriel's adaptation of the Krutka et al. (2014) posting criteria, the five criteria that were most relevant to the topics of this study include:

- Connect insights to your MA/PhD coursework and current understanding of TESL to your observation and/or co-teaching experiences.
- Share pertinent (not random or obvious) resources or teaching ideas for peers.
- Share issues, problems, and possibilities.
- Include 1-2 questions regarding your experience at the end of each post.
- Use vibrant, compelling first-person (I/we).

The first criteria prompted TAs to make the connections between theories and practice, while the second encouraged the sharing that was so well-received and appreciated by the TAs. The third criteria tried to establish the blog as a safe place for the TAs to share concerns and troubleshoot with each other (Hur & Brush, 2009). That criteria was somewhat connected to using first person

language in helping to create a sense of belonging among the TAs. The fourth criteria also encouraged collaborative interaction because it prompted TAs to ask each other questions. Table 10 show how the TAs met or did not meet each of these five criteria. Numbers indicate the quantity of examples demonstrating that criterion. The fourth blog post asking TAs to share their professional development plan was excluded from this chart because it was not a typical post.

Table 10  
*How the TAs' blog posts met criteria*

BLOG POST #1 – Classroom Observation					
	Anne	Ashley	Catherine	Judith	Lucy
Connect insights	4	3	3	2	4
Share resources	2	4	3	1	3
Share problems	1	2	1	1	1
Ask 1-2 questions	No questions	2	2	2	2 <sup>#</sup>
Use first person	I only	I only	I and we	I only	I only
BLOG POST #2 – Technology in the Classroom					
	Anne	Ashley	Catherine	Judith	Lucy
Connect insights	1	0	1	NO POST	1
Share resources	2	1	1		1
Share problems	1	0	0		2
Ask 1-2 questions	No questions	No questions	No questions		No questions
Use first person	I only	I and we*	I only		I only
BLOG POST #3 – Classroom Management					
	Anne	Ashley	Catherine	Judith	Lucy
Connect insights	NO POST	2	2	2	1
Share resources		2	3	2	2
Share problems		2	3	2	2
Ask 1-2 questions		No questions	No questions	No questions	No questions
Use first person		I and we*	I and we <sup>^</sup>	I only	I and we*

\* “We” referenced her co-teacher (CT).

<sup>^</sup> “We” referenced her supervising teacher.

<sup>#</sup> Questions were specific to the skill of listening-speaking.

The overall quality (in terms of meeting the five relevant criteria) was best for blog post #1. One consistent pattern after post #1 was that none of the TAs included questions. If the questions were intended to provide opportunities for further reflection in the meetings or online, they were not fulfilling their purpose in terms of online interaction. Although there were several factors influencing the reflective interactions on the blog, placing more administrative emphasis on the questions may boost the intended dialogic interactions in the online space.

For post #1, with the exception of Anne, all five of the TAs met each of the five criteria; Anne was missing questions. This high match to criteria seemed logical given the TAs had their entire classroom observation (of at least fifty minutes in duration) as a source of inspiration for their posts. Additionally, the prompt asked for description and evaluation from the observations. The evaluation stimulated more critical thinking as the TAs analyzed the teachers they observed, which linked to the criteria fortuitously. Two brief examples of such critical thinking come from Catherine and Judith. First, Catherine shared how the teacher she observed was very organized:

As I walked into class five minutes before it was time to start...I noticed she [the teacher] had already put large sticky notes around the room with sentences on them ready for an activity...she had obviously spent a lot of time planning her lesson, her transitions were smooth...She was able to switch from activity to activity easily connecting her warm-up activity to the new topics introduced later in the class.

Later in her post, Catherine questioned if it was possible for teachers to plan smooth transitions or if additional teaching experience would enhance the teacher's transition abilities. Judith, who observed a reading class, connected her understanding of TESL with a conversation activity she observed: "the reading was about education in different parts of the world, so by having to converse with somebody from other nationalities, they could make more meaningful connections

between their reading and the world.” To Judith, this meaningful context was a critical part in the success of the activity helping students connect their learning material to the environment in which they were interacting. Even though these are just two brief examples, the detailed and thoughtful discussion in all TAs’ posts did make it a success in terms of meeting the post criteria.

Post #2 about technology in the classroom followed the in-person meeting led by guest facilitator, Enora; the focus for the blog was to name one tech tool of interest along with reasons why it had piqued interest. Generally speaking, the prompt was simpler than the first one. The prompt did not seem to inspire sharing about problems or troubleshooting because in some cases, the TAs had not even used their tools of choice yet. Without the prompt pushing for in-depth analysis of the tool’s potential classroom application or evaluation of how it was used, the post most likely would not be rich in details. This contradicted the Krutka et al. (2014) finding that pre-service teachers’ nomination of topics increased productivity in the posts.

Post #3 saw an increase in activity with four TAs meeting most of the criteria. With the topic of classroom management aligning with mid-semester feedback from their students, the TAs probably had more to draw upon in their discussions. Even though they only had two months of classroom experience at the time of the feedback from students, the experience proved advantageous in their analysis of that feedback. That time may have enhanced their confidence in contributing to the conversations. This blog was one that helped Ashley feel more confident in sharing with her peers. In it, she shared a new strategy for avoiding students’ use of cell phones in the classroom:

...we have introduced the cell phone box. We have placed a shoe box with a lid in the middle of the big table in the classroom. If a student is caught with their phone out we tell



them to place it in the box, which is far enough from reach but still within line of vision to avoid other issues.

Ashley said she would continue to see how this affected the classroom as it was a newer strategy she had implemented. The creative solution addressed an issue that her fellow teachers were also experiencing (Hur & Brush, 2009).

Also in post #3, Lucy evaluated the use of class mixers as an activity in her speaking and listening class. She shared her reaction and an overall evaluation about why she thought the mixers were successful:

I was surprised at how involved they [the students] got into the topic. As teachers, we joined in with them in the mixers, and there was a lot of talking within the class. The dynamics of our class are really good and healthy. I think everyone likes each other so a mixer is a good activity to do with them. This helped us to see what they are capable of doing and what they like to do.

Lucy continued by saying that the students' feedback was also positive because the activity increased their opportunities to practice the skill of speaking in a unique way. The constructive feedback from students provided seemed to validate Lucy's decision to implement the mixers, which gave her a victory in terms of trying new techniques. By sharing this on the blog, Lucy demonstrated how an online community could offer a place to share insights on experimentation within the classroom (Nicholson & Bond, 2003).

It appeared that the sense of learning communities had strengthened over time as well (Preece, 2004). The third blog post had three of the four TAs using both "I" and "we" for the compelling first person tone criterion. That being said, it should be recognized that two of those three were referencing "we" in relation to their CTs instead of the TAs, and the third in relation

to her supervising teacher. Administrators probably hoped the collective sense would focus on the TA community, but it was good the TAs brought in the outside experiences to contribute to the conversations. The membership in different learning communities proved enriching for the TAs' reflections on the blogs.

In summary, the prompt designs were quite influential in the ability of the posts to meet the criteria. There was a strong start in the beginning with TAs including questions, but these quickly faded in subsequent posts. Time provided the opportunity for TAs to gain more experience, which contributed both to their confidence and their willingness to share with other TAs.

#### *4.4.3 Advantages and disadvantages of the blog*

There are many reasons administrators might utilize online collaboration tools for professional development opportunities. For the collaborative reflection training, Muriel relied upon a WordPress blog platform for centralized resource sharing and the asynchronous access it enabled. As with any tool, however, there are always advantages and disadvantages. The accessibility and relatively small learning curve made the WordPress blog a good choice for this IEP's TA training, but there were still a few barriers. If those barriers were addressed, it could enhance the experience for future iterations.

First, Question #28 of the Fall survey showed three of the five TAs would recommend a tutorial on navigating and managing blog entries in future semesters. Unlike Krutka et al. (2014) who had chosen Edmodo because of its similarity to Facebook, the blog of this study was not necessarily a familiar tool for the TAs. The TAs' desire for a tutorial made sense. Yet, the Fall survey also showed the TAs found the blog accessible and easy to use. Question #26 of the Fall survey used a Likert scale question about the ease of accessing the blog; the five-point Likert

scale ranged from very difficult to very easy. Two of the TAs found the blog very easy to access and three found it somewhat easy to access. Anne's opinion about the blog was that it was very accessible in regards to the layout and topical organization. Question #27 of the Fall survey also used the same very easy to very difficult Likert scale, and asked TAs to rate how easy it was to use the blog. Four of the TAs found it somewhat easy and one said it was very easy. In her interview, Lucy cited the "intuitive" nature of the blog as an advantage. There was one minor hiccup Lucy confronted when she could not upload a document. Anne's interview showed agreement with Lucy's perception about the intuitive nature of the blog. Anne believed the blog had "low restrictions" for posting. This supposed ease of use would seem to be positive feedback to administrators. Anne also appreciated how the WordPress platform established a freedom for simultaneous web browsing: "...because it was digital it was easy to kind of have another window open wanted to have some research or provide a link to something within [another post]." Yet, if the blog truly were as easy to access as the TAs claimed, one might expect increased use of the like and comment features. Only Ashley utilized the like feature with any frequency. Furthermore, three of the five TAs each responded only one time to a peer's blog post. Despite Killeavy and Moloney's (2010) advice to consolidate blogs to create more dialogue, the TAs of this study did not take advantage of the dialogic opportunities on the collaborative blog. Perhaps the TAs' recommendation for a tutorial on the blog would shorten the learning curve and encourage increased use of the blog's unique functionality.

The asynchronous access was another advantage that made the blog platform appealing to the TAs (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Nicholson & Bond, 2003). Within the anonymous Fall survey responses, there was one positive comment about the blog's

asynchronous characteristic: “We were able to share experience and ideas without necessarily having to always be face-to-face.” Ashley echoed the appreciation of the asynchronous access:

When you’re posting it, it doesn’t have to be- you don’t all have to be like in a meeting at the same time. So if I have time to do it at noon on Tuesday, but Lucy doesn’t have time until later that night like that’s helpful for us to be able to think about these things kind of on our own time and post them in a place that everybody has access to seeing them. As well as after the meeting times. Um, we are able to- to look at these posts. So I think that was an advantage. That it was not time sensitive so much.

There are many positive aspects found through Ashley’s feedback. First, she found the blog to be a good alternative to meeting in-person. Ashley also felt empowered to think about her posts in her own time frame while also achieving the goal of sharing ideas with others (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Nicholson & Bond, 2003). Lastly, the blog was still available after the meetings for TAs’ perusal, which eased the immediacy of viewing the blog content for independent training (Hampel & Stickler, 2015). Ashley’s comments referenced concerns about the time and effort associated with such reflective practices; the online, asynchronous platform alleviated some of those concerns.

Centralized sharing was another advantage of the blog format (Chen, 2012; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Krutka et al., 2014). Catherine noted this advantage in her interview: “we could like just see each other’s posts and- and comment on that and just have it all in one area.” On a few occasions during meetings, Muriel said she would post supporting materials to the blog as follow up to the TAs’ discussions. More details on the supporting materials are discussed later.

The privacy or security of shared materials may be a concern for some individuals. As Hur and Brush (2009) found, maintaining privacy of reflection was important to online

communities participants. The TAs of this study felt their blog environment was secure, which encouraged their engagement. Question #22 of the Fall survey explored the security aspect of the blog (see Table 11) and used a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to agree.

Table 11  
*Opinions on open reflections on the blog*

Question #22: I felt like I could post my ideas and reflections freely on the blog.

Strongly agree	2
Agree	2
Neutral	1
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0

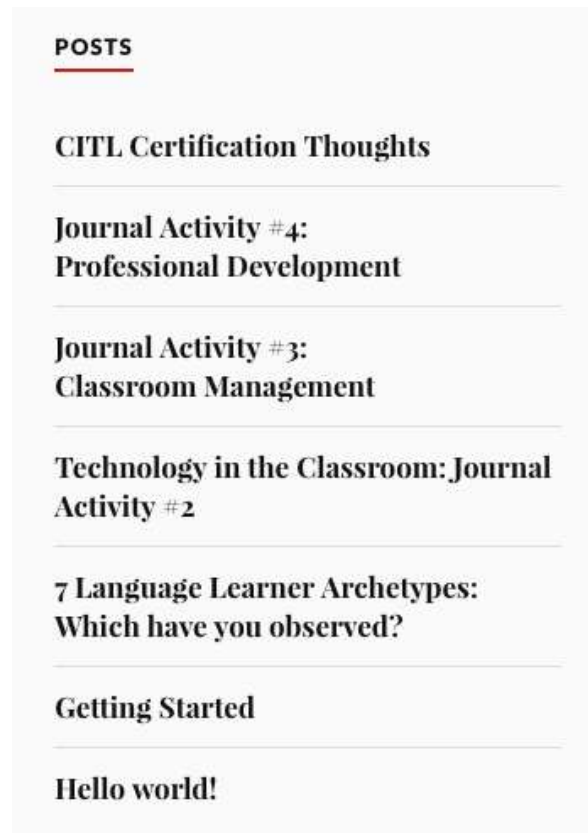
These results showed that generally TAs felt the online environment was secure enough to share their thoughts. Ashley explained her opinion of the WordPress settings that were enabled:

Because there were privacy settings, I don't think that anybody you know felt weird about um writing anything. I guess we needed to be somewhat mindful of what was written down. So not using any of the other teachers' names but I don't think that necessarily negatively impacted anything that we said.

The only people with access to the blog were the TAs, the researcher, and the Director, Muriel. Even as a guest speaker for the technology in the classroom meeting, Enora, was not granted access. At least in Ashley's opinion, such privacy settings empowered the TAs to share openly and seek honest feedback on their teaching questions and concerns.

There were not many disadvantages of the blog according to the TAs. That being said, Catherine identified an organizational flaw with the blog format that contradicted Anne's description of the blog as an organized platform. The blog had a reverse chronological order

setting that posted the most recent blog post at the top of the home page and stacked them on top of the older ones. Catherine felt this pushed the older posts into an area requiring additional effort for viewing: “[the older posts are] just kinda down and um you don’t take as much time to scroll down through those.” Perhaps TAs missed the sidebar on the bottom right corner of any page (see Figure 4), which would have allowed them to quickly link to other posts.



*Figure 4.* The sidebar from each blog page.

This new-to-old-post design may be changed through administrative settings or even the blog layout template, so it would be easy for administrators to address this organizational concern.

It is unclear whether the time investment TAs made on the blog is an advantage or disadvantage. In her interview, Muriel perceived the blog to be an “added step” that increased the amount of time TAs were already dedicating to the collaborative reflection. Administrators do not want to overwhelm reflective community participants with too many requirements

(Hobbs, 2007), but they still want participants to perceive value in the process. Table 12 shows the total amount of time TAs spent interacting on the blog over the Fall 2015 semester.

Table 12

*Amount of time TAs' spent on the blog*

Table 12 continued

**Question #18: How much time do you think you spent  
TOTAL on the blog this semester?**

<b>Less than 1 hour</b>	1
<b>1-2 hours</b>	0
<b>2-3 hours</b>	2
<b>3-4 hours</b>	1
<b>4+ hours</b>	1

As previous data showed, the TAs overall had generally positive attitudes and appreciated the collaborative reflection experience for a myriad of reasons. There were no complaints about the amount of time dedicated to the reflective journal on the blog, which Raywid (1993) said could be an issue in some educational contexts where resources were limited. In the first blog prompt, Muriel set an expectation about time investment: "Plan on spending 10-15 minutes on the post itself and then 10 minutes to respond to others' post" (see Appendix L). This would only require 20-25 minutes per blog post if the TAs followed the guidelines. Table 12 showed that for most of the TAs, the average time investment was less than one hour per entry. A deeper look into the time investment of participants may provide additional insight on the feasibility of time expectations; such information could aid administrators in adapting their collaborative reflection model accordingly.

More generally, the above insights suggested that it may behoove administrators to do a brief overview of the tool of choice and its features to mitigate any potential issues the TAs may encounter. A tutorial such as this could also cover uploading documents to avoid the document-sharing hiccup Lucy experienced. Knowing how to share documents could also help establish the blog as a resource for sharing of materials and not just for sharing thoughts. Ideally, if collaborative reflection participants know more about the assigned tool's functionality, they should use it with more regularity. It is important for administrators to mitigate the amount of time their trainees spend learning how to use a tool, and finding such a balance may be challenging.

#### *4.4.4 Qualities of the prompts*

In an effort to create authentic reflection experiences, it is important to consider the content of the prompts that are presented. Hobbs (2007) warned against the dangers of required reflection and said it can be perceived as a fake process. While interviewing the TAs, the researcher asked about how open-ended the prompts felt (Question #5). Ashley, Anne, and Lucy all described the prompts as simultaneously focused but flexible. In describing this balance, Ashley said:

I thought they were, like a good balance. It wasn't so specific that there wasn't really anywhere to go with it, but I don't feel it was so open-ended that I have no idea what was asked of me like what we were supposed to be talking about...So I think they were appropriately open ended.

Even as a novice teacher, Ashley felt equipped to participate in the discussions. Anne felt the prompts were focused but she also said, "...you're kind of open to talk about your experiences." Lucy understood the prompt as something that set parameters around a topic but gave her the



“freedom to talk about anything...within that topic.” Across all of these observations about the prompts, the use of the words “balance,” “open,” and “freedom,” showed the TAs felt empowered to share their ideas about the topic. This is a significant achievement for involving both novice and experienced teachers in the reflection process.

The outlier of the group was Catherine who felt the prompts were sometimes too open-ended. She felt unsure about what to write: “...things that I had experience with were easy, but things that um I wasn’t as familiar with- I feel like could have had a little more like I don’t know, either examples or maybe some guiding questions to follow.” Catherine had also expressed in her interview that there was a lack of explicit discussion around the benefits for reflection. Her comments regarding the lack of guidance from the blogs contrasted with the openness perceived by the other TAs. Such a contrast might have shown that uncertainty about reflection’s purpose influenced confidence in what the TAs could contribute to the blog. That is another reason in support of explicit discussions on the purpose of reflection as Krutka et al. (2014) and Germain-Rutherford (2015) suggested.

This was the first time many of the TAs had done a reflective journal; therefore, some scaffolding (Bailey & Willett, 2004; Maarof, 2007) was probably deemed necessary from Muriel’s perspective. The prompts did provide guiding questions within the topics. For the IEP’s context, the blog also served as a documentation platform (Ernest & Hopkins, 2006) for accreditation purposes. The blog had the potential to demonstrate the TAs’ knowledge within specific topics. By pre-determining the topics and prompts, Muriel could provide tailored guidance and educate on relevant professional development topics. In general, the interview with Muriel revealed her opinion that the prompts were a combination of narrowly focused and open-ended. Muriel’s described the prompts:

[They were] broad in that they could come up with many different things but narrow in that what- what we asked them to do- or what I asked them to do was pretty lockstep. So, overall, I think it was a- a mix of open-ended and directed prompts.

Muriel continued by explaining how she believed the TAs could tailor their responses to specific experiences but still stay focused on the pre-determined topic. Although Edmodo was a different platform than the blog, Krutka et al. (2014) found higher engagement when the administrators did not determine the topics for reflective discussions. In terms of blog participation, it seemed as though the topics were well-received by the TAs. For this study, time and motivation seemed to play a bigger role in the overall engagement rather than the topics being pre-determined. If anything, the topic selection modeled the types of reflective discussions that were possible; this modeling was something Germain-Rutherford (2015) felt was a good practice from administrators. It would be interesting to conduct further research about the effects of that modeling and see how the TAs directed the reflection on their own.

#### *4.4.5 The blog as a resource*

In addition to the blog's function of documenting the TAs' learning for the IEP's accreditation process, Muriel wanted it to be used as a platform for sharing training and professional development resources (Levin, 2000; Nicholson & Bond, 2003; Preece, 2004; Reich et al., 2011). Regarding that function of the blog, Muriel said:

The blog was a way for us [the IEP] to make sure that we give them the information that they need um over a period of time so it's not just that one particular moment in time at the beginning of the semester that we- we space it out. Um, which makes for much more effective learning. And asking they- they have the experiences at different points in the

semester to be able to uh to truly reflect on the information that we're giving them. Um so in- in that instance the blog served really valuable- as a really valuable platform.

Extending the TA training into the full semester posed a potential problem because there was not a convenient way to share resources among all the TAs. Muriel viewed the blog as that convenient way to connect the TAs to the training materials throughout the entire semester. Dividing up the overwhelming amount of training into smaller pieces was also feasible through the blog; this was similar to the reason Nicholson and Bond (2003) used asynchronous online discussion boards while pre-service teachers were completing their fieldwork in various locations. From Muriel's point of view, the blog was a good alternative to the previous model of a few days of intense pre-semester onboarding.

The TAs agreed that the WordPress blog platform was beneficial for access to resources that could be used for self-training (Hampel & Stickler, 2015). All five of the TAs found the WordPress site to be somewhat helpful or very helpful according to the Fall survey (see Table 13).

Table 13  
*Utility of the WordPress blog*

**Question #4: Using a WordPress site to keep the semester timeline, materials, and requirements accessible.**

<b>Very helpful</b>	3
<b>Somewhat helpful</b>	2
<b>Neutral</b>	0
<b>Somewhat unhelpful</b>	0
<b>Very unhelpful</b>	0

Question #24 of the Fall survey was an open-ended question that asked TAs to recall if they had returned to the blog as a reference for anything after making the original post, and if they did,

they had to share what it was. Only three of the five TAs responded; all responses were anonymous. One TA could not remember anything specific. Another said she returned to view the development timeline. One TA had a more detailed answer: “Yes, the observations and technology, especially. Overall I found it a useful reference and it was good to share and see other teachers’ ideas and reflections.” The variation in reasons for returning to the blog revealed its flexibility as a tool for the diverse personalities and stages of professional experience (Wenger et al., 2002).

The interviews provided further insight on how the blog operated as a resource for the TAs. Wegner et al. (2002) recommended that teacher make their online spaces adjustable based on the dynamic needs of a community. The comments from three of the TAs demonstrate how the blog accommodated their differing needs. Catherine, Anne, and Ashley all shared unique reasons for visiting the blog, which indeed demonstrated the platform’s flexibility. Catherine returned to the blog to review her own posts, which made it more of a personal resource for her professional development. She said:

I just kinda checked on my little trajectory thing that I posted. To make sure I was on track as far as my timeline that I had planned...which I was. I was excited! I was like, oh I’m following what I wrote.

Catherine’s use of the blog to access personal files was intriguing. Perhaps hosting it within a collaborative context provided a sense of accountability and motivation for her professional development endeavors.

For Anne, the blog was more of a general resource, as she seemed to ponder all topics on the blog. Anne joked that she used the blog after the posting deadlines and explained how:

Yes, I did. Because usually I did not post things til after the deadlines. But that's kind of, one of my own management, failings. I did find uh especially when it came up during my individual course component meetings when we'd talk about some specific thing it would- it made me think back on the a particular journal post. So I have gone back at least a couple times to re-read over people's responses to kinda refresh and...uh, so I can remember what they said.

It was intriguing that Anne mentioned she participated after the deadlines because she only completed two of the four posts. It would be difficult to verify how Anne actually used the resources on the blog. She did, however, consider the blog to be "a repository for meeting notes and important TA professional development documents." Anne's view of the blog through this professional development lens is nevertheless desirable from an administrator's standpoint; there were resources available and Anne seemed to take advantage of that. The connections Anne made with other colleagues in the IEP as a result of the blog also indicated the possibilities for the reflective musings to extend into the larger teaching community (Reich et al., 2011).

Muriel contributed the most in terms of sharing resources on the blog, which made sense given the guidance she provided as a facilitator (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014). As previously mentioned, Muriel provided supplementary resources that expanded the TAs' exposure to important training documents and campus resources. According to Golombek and Johnson (2004), it was important for facilitators to introduce the pre-service teachers' to field-specific concepts or relevant training materials. Muriel's sharing of resources facilitated the connections the pre-service teachers could make between their experiences and the larger training context. For example, in the first meeting with the topic of the classroom observations, Muriel wanted to clarify expectations about the training plan for the Fall 2015 semester, so she posted the training

schedule on the blog. Another resource Muriel mentioned during that meeting was a journal article about archetypes for ESL learners. She had discovered it while looking for materials on the subject of motivation, which was the theme for the in-house professional development reading group:

The reading book this semester has to do with motivation. So, if you guys wanna pick that one up. I also had a really nice article I just ran into yesterday, and it gives basically archetypes of the ESL learners...So, I'll see if I can't find it and put it on the blog.

Muriel was directly following up on a specific student issue that had been discussed during the meeting. Lucy was seeking advice on how to best help a student who seemed lost in class. The additional post Muriel made included screenshots of the archetypes listed in the article as well as a citation and notes on the author's importance in the field of second language acquisition. A sample of the post and the citation is included in Figure 5.

# 7 Language Learner Archetypes: Which have you observed?

ON **SEPTEMBER 11, 2015** / BY **MURIEL** / IN **UNCATEGORIZED** / **EDIT**

- (1) *A highly competitive and motivated student, with some negative emotions.* According to the teachers' focus group, students in this archetype are intelligent, motivated individuals with a noticeable competitive edge. They tend to have high expectations of their teachers and expect to be given new and challenging activities and materials in class. They reflect on things to a great degree and tend to be somewhat nervous.
- (2) *An unmotivated student with lower-than-average English proficiency.* This archetype is unique in a way because, although these students are placed in an elite English class, their proficiency in English is not comparable with their peers and they tend to be lower achievers in general. They are described as quiet, sombre and lacking confidence. In comparison to their elite class peers, they are perceived to be 'lazy', 'not hardworking' and that their schoolwork tends to be rather 'slapdash'.

Excerpted from: Chan, L., Dörnyei, Z., & Henry, A. (2015). **Learner archetypes and signature dynamics in the language classroom: A retrodictive qualitative modelling approach to studying L2 motivation.** In Z. Dörnyei, P. MacIntyre, & A. Henry (Eds.), *Motivational dynamics in language learning* (pp. 238-259). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Note: Zoltan Dörnyei is considered a leader in SLA motivation. His **Z. Dörnyei Website** links to his materials (free access if you find yourself without access to research databases). If I ever need to brush up on what's going on in the field with motivation, I go to his site.

Figure 5. Screenshot of Muriel's meeting follow-up.

The text of the article title and “Z. Dornyei” were links to those resources. This seemed to not only encourage TAs to explore further, but also to provide the TAs visibility to an important researcher in the field. There were no specific comments on this particular post. Therefore, the value it offered to the TAs is unclear.

As another important example of using the blog as a resource repository, Muriel added links to the blog prompt focused on the professional development timelines. The links were for teaching certificate programs on the University’s campus as well as graduate student career timelines from the University’s Career Center. Muriel noted in the prompt that planning professional development activities can be overwhelming, but she offered connections to internal and campus resources that could aid the TAs with their planning (see Figure 6).

On Friday, we will be creating your **tailored professional development timeline** for the remainder of the academic year. Think about the things you will need to do or would like to do between now and May. Following the session, I’ll ask that each of you upload your drafted timeline to the website under your profile page.

### **Why go through this process?**

Goal theory finds that the mere act of writing something down makes us much more likely to accomplish a given task.

See you on Friday!

### **Muriel**

Lange, D. (1990). A blueprint for a teacher development program. In Jack C. Richards and David Nunan (eds.), *Second language teacher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 245-268.

*Figure 6.* Screenshot from blog prompt #4.



The “tailored professional development timeline” was a document that outlined semesters and key dates related to the timelines the students would create. There ultimately were no restrictions on formats for the TAs’ development timelines, but this offered a framework the TAs could build upon. Muriel’s note about goal theory also provided a reason the timeline creation could benefit the TAs: it created accountability. Catherine’s return to the blog to check herself against her professional development plan showed at least one example of how the professional development resources benefited the reflective process. In the interview, Ashley also mentioned the value of the professional development resources. She thought the discussion and resources pushed her to broaden her vision for personal development beyond the survival mode of her first semester. Muriel’s guidance through resource sharing may have had a longer life span than that of the blog. This potential long-term influence from resource sharing was not fully measured, but it would be advantageous to incorporate as an aspect of future longitudinal studies.

## 4.5 The meetings

### 4.5.1 Engagement by the numbers

The general participation was good for all TAs except Anne who missed two of the four meetings. Occasionally TAs arrived late to the meetings. The meetings lasted around 30 or 45 minutes and started around 8:00 or 8:15 am. All meetings were recorded and posted to the blog for the TAs’ reference. Table 14 shows meeting attendance records for the five TAs.

Table 14  
*Meeting Attendance*

	#1	#2	#3	#4
<b>Anne</b>	Absent	Present	Absent	Present
<b>Ashley</b>	Present	Present	Late	Absent
<b>Catherine</b>	Present	Present	Late	Present
<b>Judith</b>	Late	Present	Present	Present

Table 14 continued

	#1	#2	#3	#4
<b>Lucy</b>	Present	Present	Present	Present
<b>Muriel</b>	Facilitated	Absent	Facilitated	Facilitated
<b>Enora</b>		Guest Facilitator		

Anne's meeting attendance was similar to her blogging participation in that she missed two of the four meetings. She had discussed her absence from the third meeting with Muriel because she was out of town for personal reasons. The tardiness from other TAs seemed pretty likely given the meeting time was early in the day in an effort to catch everyone before their days became too busy. Enora was a substitute facilitator for Meeting #2 as the IEP's resident technology expert. All meeting recordings being posted on the blog augmented the blog's utility as a resource for those who missed or those who wanted to listen again.

#### 4.5.2 *Evaluating meeting discussions*

Rather than measuring the frequency or length of each TAs' participation, the researcher chose to identify the TAs' contributions by thematic categories. This evaluation demonstrated the exposure to diverse perspectives and contributions enabled by the collaborative reflection (Chen, 2012; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Farrell, 1999; Krutka et al., 2014; Nishino, 2012; Reich et al., 2011). Table 15 shows the researcher's thematic classification of the TAs' contributions during meetings. There were other categories, but the following four were chosen given their frequency and influence in the meetings: specific tools/techniques, reflection influence/plans, opinions, and problems. Specific tools or techniques were explanations of activities, tools, or approaches the TAs could apply in their own classrooms. Reflection influence or plans included comments related to the ways the TAs had applied (or would apply) what they had been learning through the reflective experience to their roles as teachers or professionals. Opinions included

the analysis and judgment the TAs made about teaching practices and which of those practices were more effective. Problems indicated times when the TAs were seeking help from Muriel or their peers. It is important to note the brainstorming activities that occurred during the third and fourth meetings were not included in these calculations. While the brainstorming ideas involved all TAs in the meetings, they were not voluntary in nature.

Table 15  
*Quantity of contributions by category*

	Specific tools/ techniques	Reflection influence/plans	Opinions	Problems	Total
Anne	0	2	0	0	2
Ashley	8	5	2	2	17
Catherine	6	8	2	2	18
Judith	5	1	5	0	11
Lucy	6	2	0	3	11
Total	25	18	9	7	

Anne was at the end of the contribution spectrum with only two examples from the meetings. Muriel still tried to incorporate Anne's ideas despite Anne's limited attendance. For example, in the first meeting, Muriel shared Anne's observation of the teacher she observed. The topic of the observation was how the teacher adapted her speech and did frequent comprehension checks during class. This would have been categorized as a specific tool/technique and would have added another example to Anne's total contributions. However, Anne's absence disqualified her idea from being counted in terms of the meeting contributions. Anne only attended two of the four meetings, which is the main reason she did not have as many examples counted in these categories.

Ashley had 17 examples matching the selected thematic categories. For Ashley, eight of those 17 examples fell into the class of specific tools/techniques. Given Ashley's participation in a co-teaching practicum, perhaps she felt more prepared to share specific tools or techniques because some of them may have already been vetted through her CT. For example, in the first meeting on classroom observation, Judith discussed how much she appreciated how her teacher mixed her students for activities. Judith admitted she had not previously considered how to engineer the pairs more strategically to avoid students working with other students who had the same first language. Ashley shared a specific classroom management technique she and her co-teacher used for seating arrangements:

Sylvia and I before the first day before class made a seating chart. And it was Saudi, non-Saudi, Saudi, non-Saudi, 'cause it's [the class] like half Saudi and then half um...other nationalities. So that way when we just say, 'Okay, partner up in twos,' you're automatically with somebody that doesn't have your L1 [first language]. And so I think, kinda forcing them out of their comfort zone to- so they can't fall back and use Arabic when they don't know a word or something.

Coming from a primarily EFL background, Judith had not needed to think about arranging students in that way. Ashley's offering of this seating chart showed that a novice teacher could still contribute and offer insight to a TA with more years of teaching experience.

As one of the more veteran teachers, Judith discussed a technique she used to explain the value of homework. Judith acknowledged that there are always students who seemed apathetic about doing homework. To convince them otherwise, Judith said:

I mean I- I see homework not as giving them work just for the sake of giving them work. It's just like some practice, so some questions will- will come up. So, sometimes in the

class, it all seems to be clear. And then you come home and you see something and you go like, 'Oh, I don't understand what this means.' or 'I don't know how to do this anymore.'... but [some] students don't seem to see it like that. I'm trying to encourage my students to see it like that.

Judith's explanation reminded the other TAs to be explicit with students about the purpose of homework. It may seem like common sense, but this example showed how the TAs could communicate this message to students and hopefully increase participation.

Catherine was quite active in vocalizing her thoughts; she had several thoughts and musings within the reflection influences/plans category; eight of her 18 total examples fell within the reflection influence/plans category. In discussing the teacher she observed for the first blog post, Catherine shared her internal thoughts when she compared herself to the more experienced teacher (Vygotsky, 1987; Nishino, 2012):

I was very struck by the teacher I observed. Her like organization. And so, I mean I know I'm sure I'll learn that in like a methods class...I'm sure those things will come as I continue my coursework, but I don't know. That was something I was like: how can I really do this? 'Cause I feel like um when I'm up there um okay what's next? And I have to pause and think and like it's not very smooth.

Catherine felt there was a possibility that her formal MATESL training might teach her more about organization, but the thoughts about her own organization initially came from the reflective experience for the first blog post. This was exciting as Catherine was willing to share those internal thoughts and exemplified how collaborative reflection could influence one's thinking (Nishino, 2012).

Another important aspect of teacher reflection is drawing upon one's experience as a language learner. These connections of past learning experiences with current teaching experiences were something Enora encouraged as a facilitator of the meeting. Enora's questions prompted the TAs to consider how those experiences had influenced them and might be affecting their teaching decisions (Freeman, 1989). Ashley, Lucy, Anne, and Catherine all connected insights to the reflective conversations during the meetings. Lucy's example during the meeting on technology in the classroom was related to incorporating technology outside of her high school Spanish classroom:

I think it was freshmen year of high school, we had to make a video of us cooking. And kinda being like, the cook, the chef and saying what we were doing 'cause the unit was on cooking words. So that was really cool. We had to go find a recipe and then, make a video of ourselves doing that.

In her reflection, Lucy acknowledged how much she enjoyed that particular technology-based activity. Enora, the facilitator of that meeting, also thought it was a unique and engaging idea. With her comments, Lucy may have even inspired her peers to consider how they could apply this technique given her positive experience with it. Anne shared a negative experience she had encountered as a student but also offered a suggestion of how to address it as a teacher:

I had- [an experience] where the teacher um, either didn't know how to use it very well or it wasn't behaving. So it would take a lot of class time to sort out. I think it's either a case of them not planning and testing it ahead of time or the teacher not understanding.

This showed Anne did not just complain about the bad experience with technology; she had thought through the reasons it might have occurred. Even though Anne was not explicit in

declaring these results as the panacea for these issues, it was still good that she raised awareness about these ideas.

The fourth meeting brought about examples of future plans given the reflective discussion focus on professional development planning. After Muriel discussed the importance of deliberately planning one's professional development, Anne shared her goals to prepare for an industry conference. Specifically, Anne's goals included preparing an elevator speech and researching networking tips. Judith was also motivated to think about conferences as one of her professional development goals; she wanted to present her research at a regional conference. Even as a novice teacher, Lucy also expressed interest in presenting at that regional conference. Catherine put a self-imposed timeline on completing her digital portfolio by spring break. She believed that even an imperfect version would be a good start and allow her to make changes as she progressed.

The opinions category only had 10 examples across three of the five TAs. These were important to acknowledge because they demonstrated the how the TAs were thinking critically about the contexts in which they were operating. Interestingly, as the teacher with the most experience, Judith offered her opinion the most. For one example, Judith responded to Catherine's musings about how teachers modify their speech to adapt to student needs. Judith shared her opinion about how speech modification is more normal than teachers might think:

I think it comes naturally too...I mean it's not only with your students, it's with whoever you talk with different- different registers of speech when you're talking to different people. I mean, when we talk to children, we modify our speech as well. So, I guess it really does come naturally in the classroom too.

Perhaps Judith felt this would lessen the perceived pressure for teachers to work so hard on speech modification. Without knowing more about Judith's personality and perceptions of the overall reflection experience, the researcher was unable to draw any further conclusions about why she contributed so frequently with her opinions.

Another take on opinions comes from Ashley who was more timid. She discussed how she and her co-teacher would dedicate energy to assigning groups and deciding activity durations while lesson planning; they did this in an attempt to minimize issues during class. Regarding time management in class, Ashley said:

I don't think anybody wants to build in...10 minutes into a lesson for things going wrong....There's always something they [the students] don't understand that you thought they were going to and so that, you know, kinda derails your time sequencing...I don't know, I feel like you can plan the- like as much as you can, but there's always going to be that need to adjust on the fly based on what the students give you that day.

When Ashley said "I don't know" two times, she seemed a bit hesitant in declaring this to be a truth in all situations. Without substantially more experience as inspiration for this conversation, Ashley may not have felt these comments could be anything more than an opinion. Nonetheless, it is good Ashley felt comfortable enough to share her opinions during the meetings (Preece, 2004).

For the final category of problems, Lucy was the leader with three significant examples that she shared during the meetings. Lucy had discussed in prompt #1 that she was struggling with a student in her class who she felt was unmotivated. She was somewhat at a loss for determining the root cause for the student's lack of motivation. To reiterate and ask for



suggestions in the meeting, Lucy brought up this particular case again and walked through her observations and the conclusions she had drawn:

He's like the most tired person. He's always rubbing his eyes and like, looks really tired.

So, I'm like are you- do you- you still **come**. But I don't know if it's motivation or you're just not comprehending because you're too tired. Or...what because everyone else is engaged and most people finish their homework.

At the time of this meeting, Lucy still did not find a resolution. None of the other TAs had responses, but Muriel did eventually suggest reading an article about motivational archetypes for English language learners. This example demonstrated how Lucy used the reflective meetings as an opportunity to troubleshoot or brainstorm solutions with her peers, which is the in-person manifestation of the online behaviors Hur and Brush, (2009) observed. With or without a solution, it is a positive thing that the collaborative reflection experience created a space in which Lucy felt encouraged to seek support.

Overall, the examples within the meeting categories demonstrated the diverse contributions each of the TAs made. The category with the most examples being specific tools/techniques showed that the TAs utilized the meetings as a time to share ideas. This reinforced the TAs' perceptions that the collegial discussions offered them unique perspectives (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). The specific examples that were analyzed showed the variance of contributions across the spectrum of teaching experience as well as the variance in personalities. From an administrative perspective, it was good to see the design of the reflective experience facilitated reflections on past and present experiences, encouraging the TAs to connect theory with practice.

#### *4.5.3 Advantages and disadvantages of the meetings*

Supplementing the online interaction with in-person discussions was a unique approach for collaborative reflection training. The in-person meetings for topics #1 (classroom observation) and #3 (classroom management) were intended to expand some discussions and prepare TAs for others. In the case of topics #2 (technology) and #4 (professional development), the meetings laid a foundation to guide the TAs through their reflection and plan for the future professional development endeavors. While these meetings offered advantages for some TAs in terms of community building and clarification of expectations, others considered the meeting length and time to be disadvantages (Raywid, 1993). The TAs' insights on the meetings could inform administrators' future design choices for collaborative reflection.

First, the meetings offered an increased sense of togetherness and camaraderie among the TAs, which are things Feiman-Nemser (2001) thought were especially important in helping teachers develop habits of engaging in collegial discussions. According to Catherine, the meetings brought the new-to-the IEP teachers together. She said, "We were all new and kind of all in the same boat even though we had lots of different backgrounds we were able to um...yeah just share about our current experiences and then bring our past experiences into it." This suggested that Catherine felt the meetings leveled the playing field by physically putting the collective wisdom of the TAs in one space. One might also have interpreted Catherine's comment to show that the collaborative time made for a more inclusive environment that encouraged participation from all TAs regardless of previous teaching experience. For Lucy, the social interaction was a plus: "I really enjoyed getting together and talking through things." In particular, Lucy thought these discussions were a time for brainstorming about the things TAs should be doing in their new role.

Second, all four TAs' interviews included discussions on the advantage of Muriel's role as facilitator in the meetings. With their status of being new to the IEP and some to being new to teaching, the TAs valued the guidance that an expert like Muriel could provide. This perceived value aligned with the argument from Gelfuso and Dennis (2014) and Golombek and Johnson (2004) made: facilitators are instrumental in a learning community. Anne appreciated the direct feedback from Muriel and getting Muriel's "expert insight" on the issues discussed. Muriel's expert insight often came in the form of introductions to terminology or concepts from the field (Golombek & Johnson, 2004). As an example from the third meeting on classroom management, Muriel discussed the importance of rapport building with students. She explained that with rapport building, "there's buy-in with the relationship" meaning connections are made between teachers and students that encourage engagement with the content. Although this may have been a topic discussed in the TAs' formal academic programs, Muriel connected the theory to practice. The labeling of a concept reinforced the potential that collegial discussions hold in terms of general professional development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, Reich et al., 2011).

Lucy observed that Muriel had an effective balance of facilitation and open-talk time among the TAs (Krutka et al., 2014). Ashley shared her similar perspective, "I thought Muriel especially was really good about incorporating what we said and maybe kind of guiding the discussion." According to Catherine, Muriel's facilitation was moderate and guided the TAs "into a more structured approach" for the meeting discussions. Overall, the TAs' comments indicated that Muriel was effective in complementing her role as a trainer with encouragement of open communication among the TAs. Engaging the TAs in professional dialogue familiarized them with the benefits of collegial discussions, which Feiman-Nemser (2001) and Reich et al. (2011) stated was good practice, especially early in the teacher training process.

From a program administration perspective, the meetings also provided Muriel a venue for providing instructions and clarification about the TA training program. The three meetings Muriel facilitated all included reminders about the tasks of the TA training program. Sometimes it was a simple clarification that the meetings for reflection were not held each week. Other times, such as in meeting #4, Muriel spent time explaining the professional development opportunities available on campus. She complemented those explanations from the meetings with informational links on the blog for TAs to reference at their convenience. Meeting #3 was the last in-person reunion prior to the technology presentations. Muriel used that meeting to remind the TAs about the deadlines and clarify expectations about the presentations. The in-person meetings seemed to be a more reassuring way for Muriel to clarify instructions. In-person interactions provided more control over the messaging rather than simply relying on the blog as a messaging platform; the TAs may have overlooked the blog messages.

There were two significant critiques that emerged through questions about disadvantages of the meetings. First, Ashley found the meetings to be too short. The meetings were originally only scheduled for 30 minutes, but some ran closer to 45 minutes. In her interview Ashley said this about the short meetings: “I usually felt that by the end we had really, kinda gotten going and then we had to cut it short.” It seemed as though Ashley felt the brief meeting times did not offer a sufficient amount of discussion. Being one of the novice teachers, it was a positive sign that she found value in the meetings. The other novice teacher, Lucy, found there was too much overlap in the topics discussed online and in the meetings. More on this overlap will be discussed later in the section about the hybrid strategy used for the reflective collaboration.

Second, the meetings started between 8 and 9am. The first meeting was at 845am but they were later moved to 815 to accommodate Anne’s MATESL course schedule, which

changed shortly after the first meeting. Both Ashley and Catherine commented on the early time of day being a disadvantage about the meetings. Although Ashley understood the meeting time was designed to accommodate all TAs' schedules, which she acknowledged and appreciated, the meeting time "being at 815 in the morning was not the best." Catherine's opinion of the meeting time was similar to Ashley's – it was too early. However, Catherine also thought sleepiness may have negatively influenced the amount of contributions the TAs made during the meetings.

In summary, the advantages of camaraderie building and exposure to expert insights seemed to outweigh perceptions about the circumstantial disadvantages of meeting logistics. Muriel chose the early morning meeting time to catch TAs before their MATESL and PhD coursework and before their scheduled teaching times. Scheduling time for reflection has been a challenge in many education settings (Reich et al., 2011). Perhaps a more democratic route to selecting meeting times would help the reflective participants to increase activity.

#### **4.6 The hybrid model and other general considerations**

The Fall survey and interviews enlightened the researcher to some potential factors that might have influenced TAs' participation levels in the hybrid collaborative reflection as well as the perceived value of the experience. First, there was some divergence of opinions regarding the usefulness of both blogging and meeting in-person. Second, the TAs found some topics more helpful or memorable than others. These insights and opinions are important considerations for facilitators who might implement or adapt this model in their own contexts.

##### *4.6.1 The hybrid model*

From the Fall survey, all five of the TAs found the hybrid approach to be helpful. On the five-point Likert scale of very unhelpful to very helpful, four stated it was very helpful and one said somewhat helpful. This feedback showed the blending of online and in-person interactions

was valuable for the TAs' collaborative reflection experience (Matzat, 2013). Ashley was an advocate for meeting in-person for a couple of reasons. First, she felt in-person connections were complementary: "I think the balance of writing in the blogs, having a chance to comment, and then coming together and discussing together – I think all of that together was advantageous." Second, the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with peers and the Director inspired Ashley. She said, "I think it was really helpful for us all to sit together. And- But also to have the director in the room talking to us. That made it- that made the IEP seem a lot smaller in a good way." The connections afforded by the in-person meetings cultivated a sense of community for Ashley; the accessibility of the Director and the opportunity for professional discussions with peers were invigorating for her.

While the focus of the topics created a support structure for the TAs' reflection (Nicholson & Bond, 2003), the sequence of the blog followed by the meeting was more meaningful to the TAs. Ashley felt that the blog enabled some flexibility in the time she could spend reflecting on her blog contributions and improved her visibility to others' ideas prior to meetings:

And then being able to, um see other people's posts and respond to those before it was time for the meeting made our meetings much more meaningful. Because we- the time it took to kind of parse through what our own experiences was you know was done on our own time and not during the meeting.

Anne felt the blog prompts served as "schema activation" for the in-person conversations. Additionally, Catherine said: "If the blog post wasn't assigned before the discussion, then we kinda just came into it raw without a lot of like background...[and] things already prepared to talk about." This feedback suggested the three TAs felt more prepared by having time to

individually reflect on the blog then view others' ideas before the meetings, thus enriching their in-person interactions.

As previously mentioned, Lucy struggled with the rationale for reflecting both on the blog and in the meetings. To her, the redundancy of content detracted from the overall experience. The fairness of declaring the overlap is not as crucial to the conversation of the training's efficacy as the perception Lucy had about the overall experience. Indeed, some overlap of topics did exist across the online and in-person settings. In her interview, Muriel noted that the overlap existed. However, comparisons of the blog entries and meetings transcripts showed there were times when the meetings enabled elaboration on the ideas or troubleshooting shared online. This would be one successful aspect of this blended approach, which complemented findings from Matzat's (2013) study. Interestingly, Lucy often relied on her blog discussions as her contributions for the meetings. Lucy's perception was important and showed that preferences in training styles are important considerations. Although these preferences were not verified through the interviews, it could be an area for future research. Regardless, Lucy's feedback provided food for thought on the design of collaborative reflection experiences. It might be advantageous for facilitators to align collaborative reflection with participants' preferences in order to improve general efficacy. As Hagan (2009) discovered, the teachers of her study would have preferred meeting in person before beginning the collaborative reflection online.

Muriel offered ideas about a more strategic implementation of the hybrid collaborative reflection model. To address the concerns of content overlap caused by a hybrid model, Muriel said: "So either, you eliminate one or the other or, you look at the content of one or the other and make sure that it's not repeating or add something new that can only be done in that other format." Although this prompted a choice between formats, Muriel questioned if removing the

face-to-face interactions detracted from the building of a learning community. She did not have a final answer that. Lucy thought that if there was a goal of increasing dialogue on the blog (Killeavy & Moloney, 2010), requirements to comment may have increased the online engagement and negated the need for meetings altogether. The researcher shared this idea during Muriel's interview, but she replied "that building sustainable learning communities online" was not her area of expertise. Perhaps following Germain-Rutherford's (2015) checklist for successful communities of practices could serve as inspiration for future collaborative reflection endeavors.

Complicating the hybrid approach a bit more was the timing of the blog entries. Because of the TAs frequent last-minute posts, there was not always sufficient time for the TAs to review each other's comments before the meetings. At the beginning of the first meeting, Muriel asked, "Did everyone have a chance to go back and read [the posts]?" Catherine said, "I read about most of them...I don't think I got Anne's or Ashley's." That meant that Catherine read the posts and any comments from Anne and Judith's blogs, which was actually only half of the posts. Ashley admitted that she only had enough time to skim all of the posts very early in the morning before the meeting. Perhaps this could be remedied with a more firm deadline for posting, but it places another restriction on the reflection process, which may be counterproductive (Hobbs, 2007).

#### *4.6.2 Reflection topics*

Topic selection for reflection is another crucial factor to successful experiences (Nicholson & Bond, 2003) as the topics can provide facilitative structure to support the reflection. Additionally, perceptions of the topics being relevant may increase engagement (Krutka et al., 2014). Ashley spoke of the specific influence the topics had for her:



Some of the topics definitely allowed me to think about my own teaching or think about uh different ways to do things in the classroom. Um my own professional development. Definitely in ways that I probably would not have considered without um such questions. So it guided my thinking...

This demonstrated the potential for the topics to directly connect to the TAs' training needs. Ashley's comments also showed that the topic guidance supported her exploration of the aspects that were influential in shaping her teaching style.

Perceptions about the most helpful topic were explored in both the Fall survey and the interviews. Question #25 of the Fall Survey asked TAs "Which blog post/meeting did you find the most helpful?" Table 16 shows the number of times each of the four reflection topics were discussed as meaningful or significant either from the Fall Survey or from the interviews.

Table 16  
*Feedback about the most helpful topics*

	Fall survey Question #25	Interviews (of the 4 TAs)
Topic #1 - Classroom Observations	0	0
Topic #2 - Technology in the Classroom	2	2
Topic #3 – Classroom management	2	4
Topic #4 – Professional development	1	3

One of the most striking comparisons is that originally only two of the five TAs chose classroom management as the most helpful topic on the Fall survey. Yet, all four of the interviewed TAs considered aspects of the classroom management topic memorable or constructive. Catherine mentioned classroom management twice in her interview and the second time, she said: "I remember the classroom management one more vividly than the others." Ashley shared how she had applied ideas from the classroom management discussions to her own context. She was

unable to cite specific examples, but she said, “I remember thinking at the time like oh that’s like such a good way to handle this similar problem that I’m having.” Lucy also liked the opportunity to peruse experienced TAs’ classroom management methods (Vygotsky, 1987).

Professional development was another effective topic for the reflective training. Catherine thought it helped her outline her “trajectory” as a graduate student; this was a timely activity because she began the planning during her first semester of graduate school. She felt that without the timeline, she would have finished her first year having regrets for missing out. Similarly for Ashley, the introduction to new ideas was very meaningful:

Professional development...that was huge because I don’t think I would’ve considered most of those activities and conferences and workshops and things that um were pointed out to the materials in the prompt and then through the process of um looking up deadlines and dates for things. So, uh, so the professional development topic definitely helped me...think beyond just kind of surviving the fall semester.

These comments indicated that simply focusing on the daily grind might have obscured the bigger picture. The opportunities that were discussed broadened perspectives and inspired the TAs to be more proactive planners. Lucy felt overwhelmed by the amount of information that Muriel delivered, but she felt that was offset by the brainstorming and peer accountability that occurred during the discussions (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012).

Perhaps the Fall survey question limited the TAs in selecting more than one topic they found helpful. It was reassuring, however, that two of the four topics were highly regarded and memorable. The topics provided timely delivery of important training information that the TAs could then apply to their own classrooms. At the very least, the exposure to these reflective

practices was successful. Further research could reveal how much these discussions directly affected change in the TAs' classroom teaching.

#### *4.6.3 Future suggestions*

In the Fall survey, all five of the TAs agreed it would be good to continue using the hybrid approach to support new TAs in the subsequent academic year. This was interesting given Lucy's feedback that later indicated her doubts about requiring both parts of the model. However, Ashley reiterated her own desire for increased time dedicated to the overall reflective experience:

If anything I would say that it would be nice to have more, I would think as a new TA coming in. Um I know that's difficult because everybody is so busy but I think it was really helpful for all of us to come together and share experiences.

It is understandable that increased training time would be desirable for confidence building (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Ashley proposed a more regular 30-minute meetings time for the new TAs to share experiences without a formal structure. Perhaps ignorant to the risks of such high demands on time, Ashley's proposal seemed to show the training to be especially beneficial to her as a novice teacher. The positive feedback on the overall reflection experience across the Fall survey and interviews also confirmed the worth of the training even for those with more years of teaching experience.

The TAs did make a few suggestions for improving the collaboration reflection experience. Question #11 of the Fall survey asked TAs to suggest changes to support the next year's new TAs. First, Lucy and Catherine called for an exchange of more detailed materials and teaching techniques. Lucy explained:

An exchanging of materials...kind of similar to like the tech presentation thing. Where we did something like that and we kind of shared what we used in the classroom. That was really cool. So I think yeah just more sharing of materials or things that work in the classroom that they really liked.

This suggested topic or activity reflected Lucy's appreciation of her peers' diverse perspectives and ideas (Preece, 2004). Perhaps doing another quick, five-minute presentation on a specific activity for the IEP's in-house professional development program would be an experience and confidence builder. However, Lucy and Anne's topic suggestions were more practically focused and perhaps would not offer as much opportunity for reflective discussion.

Anne made another suggestion to encourage increased engagement in the blog aligned with Killeavy and Moloney's (2010) idea to use one blog that enabled comments and feedback among a community. To Anne, the blog could serve as a place for "post-meeting discussion/debate about an interesting challenge or point raised during the meeting."

Intriguingly, Anne's interview revealed her uncertainty about what content could be shared on the blog. Perhaps this uncertainty stemmed from Anne's overall lower participation. However, utilizing the blog for more open or free posting may encourage exploration. It could also motivate TAs to focus more during the meetings as they sought areas of interest for further discussion, thus extending the in-person conversations through the asynchronous format. The increased time this approach would require may negate the intended benefits (Raywid, 1993). Ultimately, the administrator's decision on the use of the blog will revolve around what works best for the particular training context.

Catherine had some intriguing suggestions regarding accountability for participation in the reflective process. Brannan and Bleistein (2012) believed teacher trainees could make

themselves accountable for reflective practices if they comprehended the value of those practices. Yet, Catherine’s comments about this directly contradicted Brannan and Belistein’s claims. In her survey, Catherine said, “Even though these were very beneficial practices, I have to admit I probably wouldn’t do them voluntarily. I would need accountability or some sort of requirement to do these activities.” Catherine specifically mentioned the WordPress blog platform was not part of her daily activity. In the semesters post-training, Catherine said she would not make additional contributions to the blog. She thought continuing the collaborative reflection would require someone “[to] take a significant amount of initiative,” but she also thought others might be interested. This comment is noteworthy because Catherine did try to initiate a discussion on the blog in the spring semester following their training. Figure 7 shows that blog post.

## One thought on “CITL Certification Thoughts”



### CATHERINE

I was surprised to see how much certain aspects of my teaching improved as I was reflecting on last semester and this semester. This semester, I’ve been much more confident and bold to try new things. I also noticed that as I’ve become a bit more independent in my planning and teaching, I’m more self-aware than I was last semester. I notice when I start going off on a tangent or if a student doesn’t understand what I’m saying. I’m able to redirect or paraphrase things more easily to teach more effectively. Even though it felt like another thing added to my list this week, I’m very glad I was able to have that bit of reflection, especially as we will be wrapping up our semester soon!

★ Like

🕒 APRIL 15, 2016 AT 10:41 AM ✎ EDIT

↩️ REPLY

Figure 7. Catherine’s post in the semester following the original training program.

Catherine's post followed one of the professional development activity of a certification offered by the University, which was one opportunity the TAs pursued as part of their development plans. The certificate was originally presented to the TAs as a campus resource during the fourth meeting on professional development. One requirement of the certificate was to write a teaching philosophy. Catherine appreciated the certificate process for the reflection it required. In particular, Catherine recognized a few ways she felt her teaching had improved. Her overall discussion may have been brief, but it demonstrated the possibility for TAs to reconnect to reflective practices one semester after the original training from the IEP. Unfortunately, no one returned to the blog to comment and the conversation stopped with Catherine's post. This may be a case where actions speak louder than words. Although it was an isolated incident, Catherine's blog post aligned with Brannan and Bleistein's (2012) idea that participants of collaborative reflection can hold themselves accountable to continue their reflective engagement.

There were several opinions regarding the most effective way to implement a hybrid model of collaborative reflection. It is important to consider the dynamics of the group and the personalities of the participants. As Preece (2004), administrators clearly outlining the purpose and expectations of a reflective program can improve the overall community building experience. This sense of cohesion can motivate participants to value the process and engage more often. Thoughtful program design and prompt selection can greatly affect overall participation as well. Again, the context in which an administrator is organizing reflective activities will determine what is the best fit.

**Research question #3: What were the TAs’ perceptions about the formation of a learning community and how did this community influence their professional development?**

Perceptions about learning communities were found through the surveys and interviews. In the Fall survey, there were two questions related to learning communities. The surveys conducted before the interviews also used two questions to specifically explore the topic. Interviews included two more questions that probed at the roles and levels of comfort within the learning communities. Table 17 has a comprehensive list of the sources and questions that directly addressed the topic of learning communities.

Table 17  
*Questions related to learning communities*

Source	Question
Fall survey	#12 Do you feel a sense of community here at the IEI? If yes, with whom? (You do not need to provide specific names.)
Fall survey	#23 I felt like the blog activity built a learning community.
Digital Survey	#19 What, if any, learning communities do you consider yourself a part of? This could be in a teacher, mentor, or learner role.
Digital Survey	#20 Did the IEI’s TA collaborative blog experience establish a learning community for you? If so, describe the learning community
Interview	#7 How would you describe your role within the IEP TA community? a. Did you feel your opinions were valued? b. Did you feel comfortable sharing with your peers?

Question #17 from the Fall survey was a short-answer question that was not necessarily specific to the collaborative reflection experience. The words “blog experience” in Question #23 from the

Fall survey narrowed the focus to the connection of the blog to the formation of the learning community. In the digital survey, Question #19 focused on a general exploration of learning community membership, while Question #20 searched for connections between the collaborative reflection experience and the formation of a learning community. The interview question shifted to the details of the roles within the TA community and descriptions about the community's norms.

#### **4.7 Formation of a learning community**

##### *4.7.1 The role of the collaborative reflection experience*

In general, the TAs felt the collaborative reflection experience did establish a learning community (Levin, 2000; Nicholson & Bond, 2003; Preece, 2004; Reich et al., 2011). From the Fall survey, Question #23 asked TAs if they felt the blog activity built a learning community, and it used a five-point Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree. Of the five respondents, one TA strongly agreed, three agreed, and one said neither. Question #20 of the digital survey asked a similar question but was open-ended for TAs to explain their perceptions in detail. All four of the TAs responded that the reflective experience did establish a learning community.

Despite agreement about the positive connection between the reflective experience and the blog, each of the TAs identified unique aspects of the TA community: inclusion of more experienced community members, the role of social connections, and common goals. For Ashley, the community only included the TAs who were also MATESL students and the Director. She said:



I think the blog experience did contribute to the learning community that is the four new TAs, with an additional extension to Iris as a more experienced TA as well as giving us familiarity with the Director.

Despite Judith's participation on the blog and in the meetings, her general absence from IEP office may have been enough to exclude her from Ashley's community member list. However, Iris (the researcher) and the Director were included in Ashley's sense of a "TA" community. This validated Vygostky's (1987) ZPD because Iris and the Director were two more experienced individuals from whom Ashley could learn.

Lucy and Catherine focused on the social aspect of the learning community by using the word "bond" (Gore, 1987; Hur & Brush, 2009). For example, Lucy stated, "I do feel a learning community bond with the new TAs." Catherine discussed how the collaborative reflection cultivated "a culture of exchange and collaboration among the TAs." She then shared an example of the collaboration:

One of the TAs the other day was having problems like grading like listening assignments...with a rubric. And I was like, well in our listening-speaking component we did a whole like meeting on rubrics. And so just kind of sharing like, bits of information like that. Um I think are helpful.

In this example, Catherine was bringing in expertise from other IEP meetings. She could help her peer troubleshoot the grading issues with the knowledge gained elsewhere.

The TA community culture may have been strengthened through the common values that the TAs discovered through the reflective process. For Anne, the TA community was brought together by those commonalities:

With our common values and the goal to become our best teacher selves, I feel that we, the first year TAs, participated as learners within our professional development learning community on the blog with Muriel serving the role of mentor.

All of these comments exhibited the robust connection between the collaborative reflection experience and the formation of the TA learning community. The meaningful collegial interactions were often inspired or enabled through the learning community.

#### *4.7.2 Respect and trust within the TA learning community*

With the sensitivity of reflection, which is often considered a very personal endeavor, respect and trust become crucial for development of successful learning communities. Preece (2004) argued that learning communities were successful when community members respected diverse viewpoints and trusted each other. Muriel had established the Post Criteria (see Appendix J) as guidelines, but the respect and trust organically developed in the collaborative reflection experience. The overall enthusiastic and pleasant personalities of the TAs undoubtedly contributed to the positivity around the learning community.

All four of the interviewed TAs discussed their respect for each other and the trust that was built through the community (Preece, 2004). In particular, Anne found the blog to be a “very supportive learning community.” Ashley, Lucy, and Catherine discussed details that might have contributed to the perception about the learning community being supportive. Ashley shared her view on how the trust among the TAs was developed:

The blog process allowed us to become more familiar with each other and gain insight to each other's experiences and teacher knowledge. In so doing, I feel that I can trust the people I was those discussions with even more.

Similar to the findings in Hur and Brush (2009), the theme of camaraderie emerged again when

Ashley shared her opinion about trust within the community. She believed the trust existed as a result of that camaraderie and what she had learned about her peers and their teaching ideas (Preece, 2004). Ashley may have respected her peers more willingly given their years of teaching experience. Nonetheless, her comfort in the learning community was a desirable attitude as it most likely contributed to her consistent engagement.

Attitudes and personalities emerged as a factor that shaped the foundation of respect and trust among the learning community. The four interviewed TAs also responded positively to the interview question: “Did you feel your opinion were valued?” Ashley elaborated on her answer in her interview:

Absolutely. And I thought that that was- that was kind of surprising to me. Not that I expected anyone to be particularly rude or dismissive, but um...yeah I definitely felt heard and I thought that it was an equal opportunity for all of us to speak and share and so, um, I thought that that was definitely a- a good part of the experience.

Ashley’s comment showed her certainty that her peers were open to different ideas. Muriel might have helped equalize the opportunities for all TAs, which enriched the TAs’ exposure to a broad spectrum of ideas. Lucy agreed an open-minded attitude was pervasive through the learning community:

I can’t recall a time when I was- hesitant to say something. Mostly cause I’m an open book so I’m not really that like afraid to speak my mind. Um, but I think in general, the TA learning community has been really open and accepting of new ideas. And also just again providing feedback guidance in an appropriate way. So not like if I have- a dumb idea and I say it, it’s not like they’re going to be like oh my gosh that’s so stupid.

Lucy’s comment of being “an open book” is reflective of her personality; she was not afraid of

sharing her ideas and felt confident in how she could deliver them. She believed feedback from her fellow TAs would be constructive. In combination with Lucy's openness, the other TAs' polite respect acceptance of diverse perspectives made it a positive experience.

#### *4.7.3 The function of a facilitator*

TAs frequently commented on Muriel's role as a facilitator of the collaborative reflection experience. This aligned with research (see Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Freeman, 1989; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Nicholson & Bond, 2003), which found that facilitators were important influences in a learning community. Specifically, Gelfuso and Dennis (2014) considered the facilitator a necessary support structure within a learning community. Previous evidence about missed opportunities for defining and clarifying the purpose of reflective activities suggested the Director did not fulfill all of her duties as a facilitator of the collaborative reflection. In relation to building a learning community, however, all four TAs who were interviewed commented on Muriel's important function as a facilitator or mentor in their learning community (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014). For Ashley, the collaborative reflection experience created opportunities to learn more about the Director. This was especially true for Ashley during the meetings:

I think it was really helpful for all of us to sit together. And- but also to have the director in the room talking to us. That made it- that made the IEP seem a lot smaller in a good way.

Although some who are new to an institute might also feel intimidated by titles of leadership, Ashley felt Muriel's engagement with the TAs was instrumental in establishing collegial connections across levels of the hierarchy. Arshavskaya and Whitney (2014) also found that an open environment could foster dialogue between novice and expert teachers. Ashley found the

interactions with Muriel to be advantageous:

[It was an advantage] having somebody who has a lot of experience and who has different perspectives and knows what's going on compared to you know the four or five of us who were very new to the IEI some of us who were very new to teaching overall.

Perhaps this view of Muriel as an “expert other” (Golombek & Johnson, 2004, p. 324) was slightly exaggerated by Ashley's status as a novice teacher. Still, Ashley appreciated the opportunity to seek expertise within a community built on collaboration and respect.

In terms of qualifying how Muriel fulfilled her role as facilitator, one can look to Catherine's interview. Catherine described Muriel's facilitation skills:

Muriel was a really good facilitator of meetings...just- yeah letting us air our- our opinions and um, but also kind of like guiding us into a more structured approach to each of the things that we talked about in the meetings.

Ashley sensed this same guidance from Muriel: “I thought that Muriel especially was really good about incorporating what we said and maybe kind of guiding the discussion, so that it could be as productive as possible.” These comments showed how Muriel's facilitation was well balanced in broadening the TAs' awareness of their own teaching decisions (Freeman, 1989). According to Catherine and Ashley, Muriel was not too invasive during the meetings, but she still guided the TAs through the reflective process.

Anne understood that she and her fellow TAs held learner roles within the TA learning community, but she viewed Muriel's role as a mentor. In particular, Anne noticed Muriel's presence on the blog: “I liked that uh we got a lot of feedback from Muriel on our posts and sort of getting her expert insight into things.” Anne was one of the only TAs who had had previous experience with the reflective process, but adding a collaborative component was new for her.

There was no specific explanation of why Anne valued this feedback from the Director other than she viewed Muriel as an expert. According to Freeman (1989), facilitators had the responsibilities of raising teachers' awareness about the unique aspects of various teaching issues as well as the ways to address them. Perhaps when Muriel helped Anne to navigate complex issues and to resolve such issues, she was completing the responsibilities of her facilitator role (Freeman, 1989). Muriel posted at least two comments for each of the topics for blogs #1, 2, and 3. Blog #4 did not necessarily allow for comments because three of the TAs included their professional development timelines on their profile pages, and those pages did not have comment functionality. Notwithstanding, perhaps the feedback enhanced the sense of community for Anne because the process was not training with a one-way flow of information from a Director to the TAs. Instead, the TAs were sharing their perspectives and receiving Muriel's feedback on the blog and in the meetings.

There were several examples of how Muriel provided feedback to the TAs and helped move the reflective conversations along (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014). From the first meeting, one can see Muriel's early acknowledgment of the TAs' work on the blog: "So, there were some really great comments in here. And, I'd like to first start out with, what questions do you have about what you observed?" After providing some positive feedback on what the TAs had written, Muriel drew attention to the questions the TAs had included at the end of their posts. After all, these questions were intended as inspiration for further discussion. Throughout the meeting, Muriel guided the discussion by citing the TAs' contributions and asked them to elaborate. These actions aligned with Ashley's description of how Muriel had incorporated the TAs' work into the discussions.

Beyond encouragement of the TAs' work and participation, Muriel advised the TAs on

matters specific to professional development. There were several times when Muriel integrated terms or concepts specific to the field of teaching ESL into the meetings. This demonstrated how Muriel achieved Golombek and Johnson's (2004) recommendation that a facilitator should help teachers to link their own understandings to terms that are specific to the field. The third meeting about classroom management presented several opportunities for Muriel to introduce or reiterate ideas such as, functional [student] groups, rapport build, flipped teaching, and learner autonomy. These examples may provide credence to the TAs' perception of Muriel being an expert in the field. Muriel was able to introduce and explain these concepts from the field, which enriched the training experience for the TAs. She was using the contributions of the TAs and guiding them through the process of connecting theory to practice. This validated the ideas presented by the TAs, and this augmented the sense that everyone could contribute within the learning community.

In summary, the TAs perceived that Muriel served an important function as facilitator in the collaborative reflection. Muriel's presence provided the TAs with access to leadership and to someone with years of experience in the field. Some of the TAs thought Muriel found a good way to guide the TAs toward productive conversations without interfering too much in the reflective process. Additionally, the feedback Muriel offered to the TAs helped them to feel more connected within the community. All of these support Muriel's effectiveness in leading this collaborative reflection process and consequently contributed to the establishment of a TA learning community.

#### *4.7.4 Results of the learning community*

One can understand the functions of the TA learning community by examining the results of the community interactions. First, the learning community encouraged sharing of advice (Hur

& Brush, 2009). Lucy described the helpful environment afforded by the learning community: “We help each other out, listen to each other, and offer advice.” This demonstrated how the collective knowledge of the community could ultimately influence the community members. In her survey, Catherine spoke about the longer lasting effects of the learning community bond, “While we don’t necessarily continue to post to the blog, we ask for advice, share experiences, and give tips in our office verbally.” This explanation from Catherine was an affirmative comment regarding the long-term value the learning community provided.

Second, there were shared emotions within the TA learning community. The sharing of emotions was something that the studies from Hur and Brush (2009) and Levin (2000) identified as advantageous for participants’ increased engagement in a community. Ashley, Catherine, and Lucy expressed how they felt overwhelmed in various instances. For Ashley and Lucy, the meeting about professional development created an overwhelming “to-do” list. Both commented on how much information Muriel presented. Yet, it equipped them with important insights for their long-term development plans. Catherine experienced similar burdens of information overload: “I feel like I’ve kind of come into it as a learner- like when I first came in, I was just overwhelmed. I was like there’s a lot to know and a lot to just kinda take in.” Through these statements, Catherine acknowledged how overwhelming the overall training experience was for her. Yet, as she also indicated in her interview, the reflective experience had the advantage of bringing everyone together. Catherine seemed to find solace in that shared status of everyone being “new and kind of all in the same boat.” Knowing that others may be encountering similar emotions can validate one’s experience and motivate more participation within a learning community (Hur & Brush, 2009).

Third, the learning community culture helped the TAs motivate each other (Hur & Brush,



2009). Sometimes the motivation was simply a reminder to participate in the collaborative reflection. Lucy and Anne said the other TAs influenced their participation on the blog by reminding them to do it. Catherine described similar behaviors from her fellow TAs:

If I'd forgotten to do it [post], they [the TAs] were a great reminder like oh I need to do this. And so I would go back and...the more detailed I saw the other TAs like be then I tried to be just as detailed...They like encouraged me to be more thorough.

There is a bit more to Catherine's example beyond the reminder to participate because there was a sense of accountability that the TA community created. The posts were not intended to be a competition for the highest word count, but Catherine looked to her peers to determine how thorough her post should have been. Whether this is a good practice or not probably depends on who posts first and how well they had aligned their response to the prompt and post criteria. That is an area to include in future research. However, the collaborative nature of the community motivated Catherine to be more accountable with her contributions. The sharing of perspectives (Chen, 2012; Duncan-Howell, 2010) were motivation in themselves for Anne: "It [the blog] really motivated for me to- to see what other people had wrote. So I would see that everyone else, was posting so I would want to see what their thoughts... and their opinions were." Even with her years of teaching experience, Anne felt motivated by the opportunities to explore others' ideas. The variety of these learning community interactions demonstrated how it could take on different meanings for each community member.

#### **4.8 How the learning community influenced the TAs**

##### *4.8.1 Views on community roles*

The TAs considered their roles within the learning communities to fall within the categories of learner, peer, and teacher. Question #7 from the interview enlightened the

researcher to the Catherine specifically said, “I definitely feel I'm playing a learner role, but in some ways I feel I can bring advice or experience to the table, not as a mentor, but as a peer.” This showed that the TAs could hold multiple roles within a community with the learner and peer roles being closely intertwined. In particular, it seemed as though the collaborative reflection might have built up Catherine’s confidence (Farrell, 2012; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). She felt she could offer her experience in the field to her peers who might be encountering similar situations (Nicholson & Bond, 2003). Ashley discussed a similar feeling she experienced as a result of the collaborative reflection:

I think it also allowed me a little bit of confidence as a new teacher like some of things I’m doing are actually working and maybe didn’t occur to my peers. So being able to participate in the collaborative process was also kind of nice.

Ashley thought she could add value to her peers’ training processes because of the collaborative reflection experience (Mason, 2000). Perhaps this was motivated by the ideas that originated from her co-teaching practicum. As she built her confidence, she began to view herself as more of a contributor, which most likely boosted her engagement. Both Catherine and Ashley’s comments related to the confidence they gained through their participation in the learning community, adding the role of peer contributor to that of learner.

Although Anne had years of teaching experience, she still considered herself primarily as a learner within the community. She said the following regarding her role within the TA community:

Uh, well I find, it’s mostly the role as a, learner role. Learning from, yourself (*to Iris*) and the other second year TA’s and your experiences. And, as well as with the other first year TAs. We’re- we’re still kind of in the give us all your knowledge kind of stage. So very

much the role still feels like a learner. Um and my prior- previous teaching experiences haven't really. Um I guess I haven't really had as much opportunity or necessity to really share those, given our current teaching context is so different. Um, so I would say my role has been mostly that of a learner. And sometimes peer. The goal.

There are many aspects to explore from Anne's response. To begin, she emphasized her role as a learner. This was interesting as she had the longest teaching history of the four TAs who were interviewed. Anne referenced that the "current teaching context" was different; she had spent a majority of her years teaching in EFL settings. It seemed Anne considered quite a bit of her experience would not connect well to the context in which the TAs found themselves, so she would not as readily share her perspectives. That being said, Anne also understood that the cohort of TAs supported the goal of making the TAs feel like peers (Levin, 2000). Anne's comments were significant because she clarified that years of experience did not automatically equate to a comfort in participating as a mentor within a learning community. The type of teaching experience is an important consideration for learning community administrators. Understanding the members' familiarity with EFL versus ESL contexts could offer a unique advantage, but it most likely would require administrators' guidance for analysis.

It is crucial that beyond holding the title of a role within a community there is also a sense of acceptance about that role. Ashley and Lucy held the novice teacher status among the TAs, but Lucy never explicitly discussed her role as a teacher. Lucy did note through her digital survey that she felt she was part of the TA learning community; this did not include a declaration that she considered herself to hold a teacher role. On the other hand, Ashley described her teacher role within the TA community during her interview:

Um I mean I still feel new and of everybody I feel like I have the least amount of experience. But especially considering now part way through my second semester compared to day one I definitely feel more part of the community and um less timid and more confident in my input and the validity of the things that I have experienced as a new teacher so far. Um so I do feel more comfortable at work and within my role as a teacher....So I would definitely say more confident more comfortable um more at home now.

Ashley's self-awareness of being "less timid" illustrated yet another example of how confidence was built within the learning community (Farrell, 2012; Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

Specifically, she gained confidence in the validity of what she was learning as a new teacher.

The incremental build up of confidence and teaching experience made Ashley more comfortable with her role as a teacher. Without the learning community as a venue for sharing ideas, perhaps Ashley's level of comfort in her role would have been different.

#### *4.8.2 Connections to other learning communities*

The collaborative reflection experience may have helped establish the TAs' understanding of what a learning community can be. There was evidence that showed the TAs participated and felt included in a variety of learning communities (Reich et al., 2011). From the Fall survey, Question #13 offered insights about the sense of community the TAs felt at the IEP. Even though all responses were anonymous, they still showed the IEP did offer a sense of community. For example, one respondent said:

I definitely feel a sense of community at the IEP as a whole. Because I have only been here for one semester, I haven't had a chance to work closely with anyone outside of my fellow TAs, component/section teachers, and interns, but look forward to getting to know

the other teachers better.

There was no specific reference to the IEP as a learning community, but it still showed how the IEP's environment was conducive to fostering growth of learning communities. In a more narrowly focused response, a respondent discussed the sense of community with TAs: "I feel that the TA office is always a good and safe place to come and work and vent about any stresses that are work or school related." Within the IEP, this respondent thought the TAs had a sense of community. Again, there was no specific reference to collaborative learning, but it demonstrated how the TA office created an environment that could reinforce the interactions of a learning community.

On the digital survey, the researcher asked a more general question about learning communities before asking the TAs for their opinions on the connections between the collaborative reflection experience and the establishment of a learning community. Question #19 asked TAs: "What, if any, learning communities do you consider yourself a part of? This could be in a teacher, mentor, or learner role." Of the four TAs who responded, only Lucy specifically discussed being part of the TA learning community at the IEP. Anne had an incomplete answer to this question, and it was not used in the analysis. Ashley and Catherine, however, both discussed their connections to the larger IEP learning community. As Ashley described: "I feel that I am part of the group of teachers at the IEI now. With a semester of teaching under my belt, I feel more part of that community." Even after only teaching for one semester, it was a positive sign that Ashley felt included in the IEP's teaching community. Perhaps the TA learning community that resulted from the collaborative reflection provided a segue into the larger IEP teaching community.

The IEP's collaborative reflection program seemed to focus on relevant topics that could

connect multiple learning communities (Reich et al., 2011). Question #21 from the Fall survey asked TAs to use a five-point Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree to answer the following question: “I felt like there was an opportunity to connect my classroom learning to the blog entries and discussions.” Four of the five TAs agreed with the statement and one strongly agreed. This demonstrated that the topics were well-selected as there was overlap between the IEP TA learning community and their graduate student learning communities. Because all of the TAs who completed the digital survey were in the MATESL program, it seemed reasonable that the program was cited as one of their learning communities. Lucy said that in addition to being part of the TA community at the IEP, she was a part “of the MATESL graduate student learning community.” Catherine explained her perspective on the topic: “I also feel that my cohort in the MATESL program is an informal learning community.” Both of these comments demonstrated that the TAs could participate in multiple communities, but it certainly helped that the TAs viewed their collaborative reflections to be pertinent to what they were learning through their graduate programs.

After being exposed to the potential benefits of the TA learning community afforded by this collaborative reflection experience, it seemed that the TAs saw the bigger picture. The TAs described what roles they held in various communities, which in itself served as a reflection on their own learning processes. It seemed as though positive community interactions could augment the level of engagement with reflective practices and collaborative professional development.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION**

This final chapter is organized into three areas: a summary of the conclusions and implications for collaborative reflection, and limitations and suggestions for future areas of research.

### **5.1 Conclusions and implications**

This study showed that this IEP's collaborative reflection model from this TA training program was fairly well-received by the TAs and the Director. The TAs were engaged in the process and felt they benefited from it. Those benefits included improved understanding of reflective teaching practices, enrichment of their teacher training, and opportunities to bond as professionals. More specifically, the TAs expressed their appreciation for chances to connect past knowledge and current graduate coursework to their current teaching situations. They also valued the increase of exposure to diverse ideas from peers and the expert insight offered by the Director.

There were some challenges related to reflection itself despite the TAs' general comfort and enthusiasm for the process. The TAs had an array of definitions for reflection, which is not necessarily a negative thing given the personal nature of reflective activities. Instead, it prompted an exploration of how the concept of reflection was explained to the TAs. Only one of the four interviewed TAs had experience with reflective teaching practices. Throughout the meetings and website, there was little to no explanation about reflection as a concept and its potential benefits. Yet, it seemed as though the program did raise awareness about reflection and its importance in teacher training. If the Director had dedicated a bit more time to clarifying the meaning and intent of reflection, perhaps some of the TAs would have felt even more comfortable and continued the practices in future semesters.

The collaborative reflection experience did ignite the TAs' connections to professional development. For the novice TAs, the opportunity to build rapport with peers and the Director offered a meaningful way to engage in the teacher training process. Some TAs felt more prepared to look at the bigger picture of their own professional development. Others felt the experience helped them gain confidence in terms of being able to facilitate their own collegial discussions outside of the learning community. Three of the four TAs who were interviewed appreciated the knowledge sharing that could occur among the group. Only one doubted the correlation of the reflective experience with changes in her own reflective practices.

Participation on the blog was measured in two ways: through word counts and how the content fulfilled the post criteria. Unfortunately, two of the more experienced TAs did not respond to some prompts. This was a potential detriment to the amount of ideas and helpful tips that could have been shared, which may have made the experience even more meaningful to the novice TAs. As the training progressed through the topics, there was an overall decline in average word counts per blog topic and the fulfillment of the post criteria. One particular post criteria that was intended to boost online interactions was the addition of questions end of the blog posts. After the first blog post, none of the TAs included questions and this may have contributed to the lack of blog comments. That being said, most of the TAs found the blog prompts to be well-balanced in guiding discussions while also allowing for exploration of one's ideas.

In regards to integrating technology into the reflective process, the Director chose a WordPress platform to complement the in-person reflective discussions. The blog served as a collaborative reflection journal and resource repository for the TAs. It also was a way to document the TAs' progress, which helped with accreditation reports. According to the TAs, the



advantages of the blog included the asynchronous access and the centralized sharing of information. In general, the TAs considered the blog to be a good resource for their professional development. With peers' comments and the Director's sharing of resources, the blog was perceived as an extra tool the TAs could rely upon for their self-education. However, there were a few design flaws that complicated the TAs' use of the tool. One such flaw was the inconvenience of scrolling through posts that were organized in reverse chronological order. Another flaw was the challenge of uploading and sharing of resources on a blog; the platform may not be as intuitive as the Director had anticipated. The TAs recommended a training session on the technology tool of choice to help future TA cohorts participating in a collaborative reflection model. This could be incorporated into an introductory session focused on the explanation of reflection as a concept.

In evaluating the meeting discussions, the researcher categorized the meeting contributions. From highest number of examples to lowest, the categories were: specific tools/techniques, reflection influence/plans, opinions, and problems. The meetings involved a heavy concentration on the sharing of specific tools and techniques. This validated the TAs' perceptions that the collaborative reflection model was successful for sharing and gaining different perspectives. Reflection influence and plans was the next biggest category. These categories showed the reflective musings of the TAs as well as the plans they made for changes to their own practices. Again, the TAs' feelings were validated because they could apply unique perspectives on theory and learning to their own classroom teaching. Regarding the disadvantages of the meetings, the TAs thought the early morning meeting times negatively influenced the productivity of the discussions even though they understood the challenges of

scheduling logistics. A more democratic approach to the scheduling may address the concerns about meeting times.

Complementing the blog with in-person meetings involved a novel approach for a semester-long training program. Some of the meetings preceded the blog posts, which the TAs did not find was as effective. Additionally, the hybrid model proved to be redundant to some of the TAs and the Director; there were some sentiments that the content overlapped significantly. Though, there were questions about the effects of completely removing the in-person interactions. Some TAs expressed how much connection was built during the in-person meetings in particular. Those connections may prove important for addressing the concerns related to the creation of accountability for reflective practices.

The TAs credited the collaborative reflection experience for establishing a learning community among the new TAs. There were different aspects about the learning community that the TAs appreciated. One important aspect was the access to the insights of other teachers with more teaching experience. Each of the experienced TAs came into the IEP with experience from unique educational contexts. This multifaceted input was complemented by the Director's input as the primary facilitator; both were crucial in establishing the learning community's open and welcoming environment. A second important aspect was the bond that the TAs felt. They commented how they learned to trust and respect each other through the collaborative reflection process. Another important aspect of the learning community's success was the facilitator and mentor, Muriel. Although Muriel's primary role was to train the TAs, her facilitation techniques were impressive to the TAs. The TAs felt motivated to share their input and contribute to the discussions under Muriel's guidance.

The TA learning community facilitated an exploration of roles in the scope of the contexts in which the TAs found themselves. Most of the TAs felt they fit into learner roles acknowledging how much more there was to comprehend with their teaching responsibilities. However, the collaborative reflection experience enriched the teacher training experience for some of the TAs. One of the novice TAs felt particularly appreciative of how much her confidence grew over the semester. Eventually, she felt like she could play more of a peer role within the group. That TA's ideas and contributions had been validated by the Director and her fellow colleagues was a positive result of the collaborative reflection. Of those interviewed, the TA with the most experience offered a humble perspective on being a learner within the community. It was important that she engaged with that attitude and did not confuse her years of experience as something more. However, this attitude was also a sign that facilitators must find ways to appropriately balance an incorporation of teachers' expert insights and instill a sense of humility about learning from one another. In general, the learning community created some fairly promising results and demonstrated the potential these collaborative reflective activities have in bringing such groups together.

## **5.2 Limitations and future research**

While this study revealed beneficial insights into the collaborative reflection process, there were several limitations. Future research could possibly address these limitations. First, the survey and interview data collection occurred in the semester following the implementation of the collaborative reflection training. It would be interesting to learn about the extent of the reflection's effects in subsequent semesters. The brief time frame of this study was unable to show the long-term effects the collaborative reflection had on the TAs' professional development. More in-depth research into the challenges of time investment for reflection and

the hybrid models could also inform teacher educators on the most effective designs for collaborative reflection.

Second, this study focused on a small cohort of five TAs and one Director from one IEP. Expanding the scale of participants could substantiate the successes and challenges that were found through the collaborative reflection model used in the study. Additionally, there could be value in broadening the scope of participants to include teacher trainees at other IEPs. This was an idea that the IEP Director mentioned during her interview to expand the professional network for the trainees. It would be interesting to see how that type of online reflective model would change the dynamics. Utilizing the checklists for building successful communities of practice and the lessons learned from this study could create a stronger model of collaborative reflection.

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APPENDIX A  
Fall 2015 New TA Survey

Although this was administered through the university's secure survey webtool, the survey questions have been reformatted for ease of reading.

Directions: Please rate the following according to the Likert scales listed below them.

1. Orientation Week

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very unhelpful

2. The collaborative reflection blog

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very unhelpful

3. Classroom observations of other IEI teachers

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very unhelpful

4. Using a WordPress site to keep the semester timeline, materials, and requirements accessible

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very unhelpful

5. Completing a pre- / post-semester teaching philosophy

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very unhelpful

6. Creation of a professional development timeline

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very unhelpful

Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very helpful

7. Technology tools overview

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very helpful

8. Technology SPEcTacular presentation

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very helpful

9. Classroom management discussion

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very helpful

10. A semester-long approach to new TA support

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very helpful

11. Think about the topics listed above. What changes would you make, if any, to help support next year's new TAs?

12. What was one of the most helpful things that you did or that the IEI provided in learning more about the institute's culture?

13. Do you feel a sense of community here at the IEI? If yes, with whom? (You do not need to provide specific names)

14. Who were some influential people who provided short-term or long-term support through the semester? (Again, you do not need to provide specific names.)

15. On a scale of 1-10, rate your teaching confidence level going into spring 2016.

1 - Very unconfident

- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 – A little unconfident
- 6 – A little confident
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Very confident! I got this!

16. Please use the space below to provide any additional feedback on the IEI's new TA support program.

17. Had you done any reflection journaling before this activity? (Please consider reflection journaling for teaching purposes only.)

18. How much time do you think you spent TOTAL on the blog this semester?

- Less than 1 hour
- 1-2 hours
- 2-3 hours
- 3-4 hours
- 4+ hours

19. How much time did you spend INTERACTING on the blog over the entire semester? (e.g., reading other posts, commenting on posts, etc.)

- Less than 1 hour
- 1-2 hours
- 2+ hours

20. How would you rate the quantity of blog posts?

- Too Few
- Just Right
- Too Many

21. I felt like there was an opportunity to connect my classroom learning to the blog entries and discussions.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

22. I felt like I could post my ideas and reflections freely on the blog.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree

Disagree  
Strongly disagree

23. I felt like the blog activity built a learning community.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Neither agree or disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

24. Did you return to the blog as a reference for anything later? If so, what?

25. Which blog post/meeting did you find the most helpful? (choose 1)

Observations  
Technology  
Classroom Management  
Professional Development

26. How easy was it to access the blog?

Very easy  
Somewhat easy  
Neutral  
Somewhat difficult  
Very difficult

27. How easy was it to use the blog?

Very easy  
Somewhat easy  
Neutral  
Somewhat difficult  
Very difficult

28. Do you feel it is necessary in future semesters to do a tutorial on navigating and managing blog entries?

Yes  
No

29. How helpful was the hybrid approach?

Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neutral  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very unhelpful

30. Would you recommend we continue to use this hybrid approach to support new TAs next Fall?

Yes  
Maybe  
No

31. Please use the space below to provide any other feedback on the collaborative blog activity.  
**THANK YOU FOR YOUR FEEDBACK!**

APPENDIX B  
TA Email Messages

*Email 1: Before agreeing to participate*

Dear (selected teaching assistant's name),

My name is Valerie Abbott, a second year MATESL student at UIUC. I have contacted you to invite you to take part in my Master's thesis project titled: "Blogging for Collaborative Reflection on Teaching: Investigating the Development of Reflective Practices of New Teachers." Your participation entails completing a digital survey and individual interviews this semester and in the Fall semester 2016. A detailed description of the project's objectives, data collection procedures, and an estimated time commitment on your part are included in the Informed Consent form attached. After you read it, if you agree with all of the terms, please email me at [vabbott2@illinois.edu](mailto:vabbott2@illinois.edu) as soon as possible to arrange a quick meeting and sign the form. Otherwise, if you have any questions or concerns about your participation or the project, please do not hesitate to contact me by email.

Thank you in advance.

Sincerely,  
Valerie Abbott

*Email 2: After signing the Informed Consent form*

Dear (selected teaching assistant's name),

Thank you for your interest in participating in this project. As the first step of the data collection procedure, I would like to ask you to fill out a survey (<https://illinois.edu/sb/sec/3292911>). This should not take more than 20-30 minutes to complete. Please complete this within 3-5 days of receiving this email. If you have any questions or doubts about any item in the survey, please feel free to send me an email to [vabbott2@illinois.edu](mailto:vabbott2@illinois.edu).

In addition to the survey, I would like to ask you to complete the following Doodle poll with the times you are available for an individual interview with Val (maximum of 30-45 minutes).

Doodle poll

If your schedule changes and the interview times become inconvenient for you, please let me know in advance by email to reschedule within the same week, if possible.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,  
Valerie Abbott



APPENDIX C  
TA Informed Consent Form

Dear IEI Teaching Assistant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this project. To begin this project, it is essential for me to have your informed consent. Before you agree to participate, I invite you to read a brief description and purpose of the project you will be part of, a description of the research procedures, and the estimated time commitment for the procedures. Please read carefully and let me know if you have any questions or concerns at [vabbott2@illinois.edu](mailto:vabbott2@illinois.edu).

**Title of Project:** Blogging for Collaborative Reflection on Teaching: Investigating the Development of Reflective Practices of New Teachers

**Responsible Principal Investigator:** Randall Sadler

**Other Investigator(s):** Valerie Abbott

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to investigate how the collaborative use of technology for pre-service language teachers can augment reflective teaching practices and build a learning community. Additionally, I will examine the role of the blog in the bigger picture of professional development as a new teacher or a teacher who is new to the Intensive English Institute (IEI).

1. **Procedures to be followed:** In order to answer the research questions, the main procedures are described below with estimated timing.

Data collection procedure	Topic	Media	When? How long?
Blog entries	collaborative reflection journal blog	WordPress	Consent for the blog posts written in Fall semester 2015
Digital survey	biographical information and professional teaching experience	Webtools, distributed through email	Once during the semester following the TA training program: February-March 2016 20-30 minutes
Individual interview (1 per participant)	experience with the blog, reflective practices, learning communities	Face-to-face, researcher's note taking, audio recording	The semester following the TA training program: February-March 2016 30-45 minutes
Delayed feedback – individual interview (1 per participant)	experience with the blog, reflective practices, learning communities	Face-to-face, researcher's note taking, audio recording	*TBD – some time in Fall 2016 20-25 minutes

2. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no physical risks associated with any research procedure you will be participating in. Any discomfort or risk is not expected to be any greater than what is experienced in everyday life; for example, there may be some

discomfort associated with being asked about professional practices and decision making processes.

3. **Benefits:** Institutions are often concerned about how to encourage reflection in more realistic manners, and investigating this particular hybrid model (online blog and in-person debrief) of a reflection journal could provide more insight into the blog's utility. The study offers insight into a different method for teacher reflection which utilizes technology instead of hardcopy journals. More specifically, it will investigate the blog's effectiveness for supporting pre-service language teachers' professional development, developing a learning community, and fostering TAs' establishment or refinement of reflective practices.
4. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Confidentiality will be kept throughout the duration of this project. All collected data will be accessed only by the researcher and RPI, both of whom ensure absolute privacy by not discussing any of the collected data for the length of the project until its final submission. The only exceptions to sharing of the findings is to discuss these with the researcher's advisor (RPI) and the request for participants' names in the initial background survey. Identifying information from the background survey will be in a password-protected Box file. In order to maintain privacy of data, pseudonyms will be used (in interview notes and in the final version of the project) so as to preserve anonymity. Some biographical information will be presented in the final version of this thesis in the form of vignettes with pseudonyms used again. All notes will be taken in a password-protected OneNote notebook, which will only be accessible by the researcher. All audio recordings will be kept secure in a password-protected Box file.

In general, we will not tell anyone any information about you. When this research is discussed or published, no one will know that you were in the study. However, laws and university rules might require us to disclose information about you. For example, if required by laws or University Policy, study information which identifies you and the consent form signed by you may be seen or copied by the following people or groups:

- The university committee and office that reviews and approves research studies, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Office for Protection of Research Subjects;
- University and state auditors, and Departments of the university responsible for oversight of research.

5. **Whom to contact:** Please contact Randall Sadler at 217-244-2734 or via e-mail at [rsadler@illinois.edu](mailto:rsadler@illinois.edu) with any questions or concerns about the research. You may also call him if you feel you have been injured or harmed by this research. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu).
6. **Compensation:** There is no compensation for participating in this project.
7. **Cost of participating:** There are no monetary costs by participating in this project.

8. **Voluntariness:** Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation is completely voluntary and will have no effect on your grades at, status at, or future relations with the University of Illinois. You may discontinue your participation from the project at any time by notifying the researcher via e-mail.
9. **Dissemination:** Research results will be disseminated via a thesis that will be publicly available via IDEALS. Due to their potential implications for UIUC's Intensive English Institute (IEI), this project's findings could be shared with the program administrators and component leaders at the IEI.
- I have read and understand the above consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
  - I was given a copy of this consent form for my records.

By signing below, I voluntary agree to participate in *all* the activities described under "Procedures to be followed."

---

Participant Signature

---

Date

## APPENDIX D

### TA Digital Survey

Although this was administered through the university's secure survey webtool, the survey questions have been reformatted for ease of reading.

- 1) What is your name?
- 2) What is your nationality?
- 3) What is your native language?
- 4) What languages other than your native language have you studied or learned? Please list all of them.
- 5) How proficient do you consider yourself in each of the languages listed in Question #4? Please list all the languages and the ranking next to it based on the following scale: Native-like (4) ~ highly proficient (3) ~ good working knowledge (2) ~ basic communication skills (1). Example: Spanish - 3
- 6) Are you enrolled in any graduate coursework? If so, what degree are you pursuing?
- 7) Have you taught languages other than English? If so, which languages and for how long?
- 8) How long have you been teaching ESL or EFL?
- 9) What is your current role at the IEP?
- 10) What kinds of professional development activities are you pursuing?
- 11) How would you define reflective teaching practices? Feel free to write as much as you deem necessary.
- 12) On a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important), rate the importance of reflective teaching practices.
- 13) Do you have reflective teaching practices? If so, describe them.
- 14) On a scale of 1 (not comfortable at all) to 5 (very comfortable), rate how comfortable you are with your reflective teaching practices.
- 15) Did the collaborative journal entries and discussions affect your thoughts or analysis of your own teaching practices? If so, please describe how.
- 16) Do you have experience in reflective journaling (for teaching purposes)? If yes, what were the contexts and expectations? Was it an individual or collaborative journal? Was it a hard copy or electronic journal? What was the purpose?
- 17) Describe your overall impression and/or thoughts about the IEP TA collaborative journal blog experience.
- 18) Is there something you wish you had known before you started the IEP TA collaborative journal blog process as part of your training? If so, please describe it below.
- 19) What, if any, learning communities do you consider yourself a part of? This could be in a teacher, mentor, or learner role.
- 20) Did the IEP's TA collaborative blog experience establish a learning community for you? If so, describe the learning community.

## APPENDIX E

### TA Interview Questions

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the **collaborative use of technology** for pre-service language teachers can augment **reflective teaching practices** and build a **learning community**. Additionally, I will examine the role of the blog in the bigger picture of **professional development** as a new teacher or a teacher who is new to the Intensive English Institute (IEI).

#### **Voluntary reminder**

Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation is completely voluntary and will have no effect on your grades at, status at, or future relations with the University of Illinois. You may discontinue your participation from the project at any time by notifying the researcher via e-mail.

#### **Background knowledge**

- 1) Explain your overall experience and opinion with the collaborative reflection blog.

#### **Reflection**

- 2) What are your reflective teaching practices and how have they changed over the semester?
- 3) How did the collaborative journal entries influence you?
- 4) How open-ended did the prompts feel?
- 5) Did you use the blog after the deadlines? If so, how?

#### **Learning community**

- 6) How did other TAs influence your participation on the blog?
- 7) How would you describe your role within the IEI TA community?
  - a. Did you feel your opinions were valued?
  - b. Did you feel comfortable sharing with your peers?

#### **Logistics**

- 8) What were the advantages and disadvantages of the blog format for reflection?
- 9) What were the advantages and disadvantages of the discussions?
- 10) Would you find value in talking about the effects of the blogging and discussion process at a metacognitive level?

#### **Anything to add?**

APPENDIX F  
Director Email Messages

*Email 1: Before agreeing to participate*

Dear IEI Administrator,

As a second year MATESL student at UIUC, I have contacted you to invite you to take part in my Master's thesis project titled: "Blogging for Collaborative Reflection on Teaching: Investigating the Development of Reflective Practices of New Teachers." Your participation entails completing a digital survey and individual interviews this semester. A detailed description of the project's objectives, data collection procedures, and an estimated time commitment on your part are included in the Informed Consent form attached. After you read it, if you agree with all of the terms, please email me at [yabbott2@illinois.edu](mailto:yabbott2@illinois.edu) as soon as possible to arrange an initial meeting and sign the form. Otherwise, if you have any questions or concerns about your participation or the project, please do not hesitate to contact me by email.

Thank you in advance.

Sincerely,  
Valerie Abbott

*Email 2: After signing the Informed Consent form*

Dear IEI Administrator,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this project. I would ask that you complete the [Doodle poll](#) for the days and times you are available for an individual interview (maximum of 20 minutes).

Prior to the interview, I would ask that you complete a digital survey at the following link: <https://illinois.edu/sb/sec/3068374>. This should not take more than 15-20 minutes to complete. Please complete this at least 2 days before the scheduled interview. If you have any questions or doubts about any item in the survey, please feel free to send me an email to [yabbott2@illinois.edu](mailto:yabbott2@illinois.edu).

If your schedule changes and the interview times become inconvenient for you, please let me know in advance by email to reschedule within the same week, if possible.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,  
Valerie Abbott

APPENDIX G  
Director Informed Consent Form

Dear IEI Administrator,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this project. To begin this project, it is essential for me to have your informed consent. Before you agree to participate, I invite you to read a brief description and purpose of the project you will be part of, a description of the research procedures, and the estimated time commitment for them. Please read carefully and let me know if you have any questions or concerns at [vabbott2@illinois.edu](mailto:vabbott2@illinois.edu).

**Title of Project:** Blogging for Collaborative Reflection on Teaching: Investigating the Development of Reflective Practices of New Teachers

**Responsible Principal Investigator:** Randall Sadler

**Other Investigator(s):** Valerie Abbott

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to investigate how the collaborative use of technology for pre-service language teachers can augment reflective teaching practices and build a learning community. Additionally, I will examine the role of the blog in the bigger picture of professional development as a new teacher or a teacher who is new to the Intensive English Institute (IEI).

1. **Procedures to be followed:** In order to answer the research questions, the main procedures are described below together with estimated timing.

Data collection procedure	Topic	Media	When? How long?
Blog entries	collaborative reflection journal blog	WordPress	Consent for the blog posts written in Fall semester 2015
Digital survey	biographical information and professional teaching experience	Webtools, distributed through email	The semester following the TA training program: March 2016 15-20 minutes
Individual interviews (1 per participant)	general ideas about the reflective practices of TAs	Face-to-face, researcher's note taking, audio recording	The semester following the TA training program: March 2016 30 minutes

2. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no physical risks associated with any research procedure you will be participating in. Any discomfort or risk is not expected to be any greater than what is experienced in everyday life; for example, there may be some discomfort associated with being asked about professional practices and decision making processes.

3. **Benefits:** While there are no direct monetary or institutional benefits to the participant, institutions are often concerned about how to encourage reflection in more realistic manners, and investigating this particular hybrid model (online blog and in-person debrief) of a reflection journal could provide more insight into the blog's utility. The study offers insight into a different method for teacher reflection which utilizes technology instead of hardcopy journals. More specifically, it will investigate the blog's effectiveness for supporting pre-service language teachers' professional development, developing a learning community, and fostering TAs' establishment or refinement of reflective practices.
4. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Confidentiality will be kept throughout the duration of this project. All collected data will be accessed only by the researcher and RPI, both of whom ensure absolute privacy by not discussing any of the collected data for the length of the project until its final submission. The only exceptions to the sharing of the findings is to discuss these with the researcher's advisor (RPI) and the request for participants' names in the initial background survey. Identifying information from the background survey will be in a password-protected Box file. In order to maintain privacy of data, pseudonyms will be used (in interview notes and in the final version of the project) so as to preserve anonymity. Some biographical information will be presented in the final version of this thesis in the form of vignettes with pseudonyms used again. All notes will be taken in a password-protected OneNote notebook, which will only be accessible by the researcher. All audio recordings will be kept secure in a password-protected Box file.

In general, we will not tell anyone any information about you. When this research is discussed or published, no one will know that you were in the study. However, laws and university rules might require us to disclose information about you. For example, if required by laws or University Policy, study information which identifies you and the consent form signed by you may be seen or copied by the following people or groups:

- The university committee and office that reviews and approves research studies, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Office for Protection of Research Subjects;
  - University and state auditors, and Departments of the university responsible for oversight of research.
5. **Whom to contact:** Please contact Randall Sadler at 217-244-2734 or via e-mail at [rsadler@illinois.edu](mailto:rsadler@illinois.edu) with any questions or concerns about the research. You may also call him if you feel you have been injured or harmed by this research. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu).
  6. **Compensation:** There is no compensation for participating in this project.
  7. **Cost of participating:** There are no monetary costs by participating in this project.



8. **Voluntariness:** Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation is completely voluntary and will have no effect on your grades at, status at, or future relations with the University of Illinois. You may discontinue your participation from the project at any time by notifying the researcher via e-mail.
9. **Dissemination:** Research results will be disseminated via a thesis that will be publicly available via IDEALS. Due to their potential implications for UIUC's Intensive English Institute (IEI), this project's findings could be shared with the program administrators and component leaders at the IEI.
- I have read and understand the above consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
  - I was given a copy of this consent form for my records.

By signing below, I voluntary agree to participate in *all* the activities described under "Procedures to be followed."

---

Participant Signature

---

Date

## APPENDIX H

### Director Digital Survey

Although this was administered through the university's secure survey webtool, the survey questions have been reformatted for ease of reading.

- 1) What is your name?
- 2) What is your nationality?
- 3) What is your native language?
- 4) What languages other than your native language have you studied or learned? Please list all of them.
- 5) How proficient do you consider yourself in each of the languages listed in Question #4? Please list all the languages and the ranking next to it based on the following scale: Native-like (4) ~ highly proficient (3) ~ good working knowledge (2) ~ basic communication skills (1). Example: Spanish - 3
- 6) What is your highest level of education? Please include the name of your program/degree.
- 7) Have you taught languages other than English? If so, which languages and for how long?
- 8) How long have you been teaching ESL or EFL?
- 9) What is your current role at the IEP? How long have you been in that role?
- 10) What experience do you have supervising teachers who are new to the IEL, specifically TAs?
- 11) What kinds of professional development activities are you currently pursuing?
- 12) How would you define reflective teaching practices? Feel free to write as much as you deem necessary.
- 13) On a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important), rate the importance of reflective teaching practices.
- 14) Do you have reflective teaching practices? If so, describe them.
- 15) On a scale of 1 (not comfortable at all) to 5 (very comfortable), rate how comfortable you are with your reflective teaching practices.
- 16) Do you have experience in reflective journaling (for teaching purposes)? If yes, what were the contexts and expectations? Was it an individual or collaborative journal? Was it a hard copy or electronic journal? What was the purpose?
- 17) What, if any, learning communities do you consider yourself a part of? This could be in a teacher, mentor, or learner role.
- 18) What were your expectations for the collaborative reflection blog? How were they met or not met?
- 19) Would you consider using this collaborative reflection blog model again? If so, explain if and how you would make any changes.

## APPENDIX I

### Director Interview Questions

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the **collaborative use of technology** for pre-service language teachers can augment **reflective teaching practices** and build a **learning community**. Additionally, I will examine the role of the blog in the bigger picture of **professional development** as a new teacher or a teacher who is new to the Intensive English Institute (IEI).

#### **Voluntary reminder**

Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation is completely voluntary and will have no effect on your grades at, status at, or future relations with the University of Illinois. You may discontinue your participation from the project at any time by notifying the researcher via e-mail.

#### Background knowledge

- 1) Explain your overall experience and opinion with the collaborative reflection blog.

#### Reflection

- 2) What was the overall purpose of the reflection blog? Do you think expectations were met?
- 3) Do you think the TAs' reflective practices have changed over the semester? If so, how? Are there examples?
- 4) How open-ended did you find the prompts? Did they produce what you anticipated? Explain how or why.
  - a. Did you feel the blogs and discussions showed evidence of quality reflection?

#### Learning community

- 5) What strategies did you use to help build a learning community? Do you think it was effective?

#### Logistics

- 6) What were the advantages and disadvantages of the blog format for reflection?
- 7) What were the advantages and disadvantages of the discussions?
- 8) Would you consider adding an element of reflection on the reflection (metacognitive thinking) to help TAs assess the effects of their work with blogging? Do you think it would be valuable?

#### Questions based on TA interviews

- 9) There was a comment about frequency and format of the discussions. One TA said it would be nice to have more interaction online or F2F but not necessarily both. She felt everything that was on the blog was discussed in person. What is your reaction to that?
- 10) There was a mixed response to the question about using the blog after the deadlines? What do you think might encourage more use later?

APPENDIX J  
IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects  
528 East Green Street  
Suite 203  
Champaign, IL 61820



February 10, 2016

Randall Sadler  
Department of Linguistics  
4080 Foreign Language Building  
707 S. Mathews Avenue

Urbana, IL 61801

RE: *Blogging for Collaborative Reflection on Teaching: Investigating the Development of Reflective Practices of New Teachers*  
IRB Protocol Number: 16543

Dear Dr. Sadler:

Thank you for submitting the completed IRB application form for your project entitled *Blogging for Collaborative Reflection on Teaching: Investigating the Development of Reflective Practices of New Teachers*. Your project was assigned Institutional Review Board (IRB) Protocol Number 16543 and reviewed. It has been determined that the research activities described in this application meet the criteria for exemption at 45CFR46.101(b)(4).

This determination of exemption only applies to the research study as submitted. Please note that additional modifications to your project need to be submitted to the IRB for review and exemption determination or approval before the modifications are initiated.

Copies of the attached, date-stamped consent form(s) are to be used when obtaining informed consent. If there is a need to revise or alter the consent form(s), please submit the revised form(s) for IRB review, approval, and date-stamping prior to use.

**Exempt protocols will be closed and archived five years from the date of approval. Researchers will be required to contact our office if the study will continue beyond five years. If an amendment is submitted once the study has been archived, researchers will need to submit a new application and obtain approval prior to implementing the change.**

We appreciate your conscientious adherence to the requirements of human subjects research. If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me at OPRS, or visit our website at <http://oprs.research.illinois.edu>

Sincerely,

Michelle Lore, MS  
Human Subjects Research Specialist, Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

---

# Post Criteria

Please use the guidelines below when posting:

## **Ideas/Content:**

- Connect insights to your MA/PhD coursework and current understanding of TESL to your observations and/or co-teaching experiences.
- Share pertinent (not random or obvious) resources or teaching ideas for peers.
- Share issues, problems, and possibilities.
- **Include 1-2 questions regarding your experience at the end of each post.**

## **Voice/Word Choice:**

- Professional, respectful tone appropriate for audience and purpose
- Use vibrant, compelling first-person (I/we)
- Use language related to ESL instruction
- Make every word count!

## **Conventions:**

- Maintain confidentiality/privacy (use pseudonyms to refer to cooperating teacher and students)

## **Responses to the posts of others:**

- Add something to the commentary, rather than a simple congratulations.
- May add a different perspective to others' ideas.



Be the first to like this.

## APPENDIX L

### Blog Prompts

#### **PROMPT #1 – CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS**

# Getting Started

ON [SEPTEMBER 2, 2015](#) / BY [MURIEL](#) / IN [CLASS OBSERVATIONS](#) / [EDIT](#)

Welcome to the TA collaborative online journal! Your first post is due prior to our discussion meeting scheduled for next Friday, Sept. 11th. If you cannot come to the discussion, please make sure that you read the online discussion and follow-up.

**Criteria for posting is located here: [Post Criteria](#).**

The first post should follow your class observations. Here's the post topic:



*Describe and evaluate how the teacher you observed explicitly addressed students' (Reading / Grammar / Listening / Speaking / Writing) skills.*

Please be creative with your posts. You can write a response, upload notes, pictures, videos – ANYTHING related to your observation and your thoughts on the topic. Plan on spending 10-15 minutes on the post itself and then 10 minutes to respond to others' posts.

**Remember: At the end of each post, include 1-2 questions you are thinking about regarding the topic.**

Looking forward to a great online (and offline) discussion,

[MURIEL](#)

[Hear meeting discussion.](#)



Be the first to like this.

## PROMPT #2 – TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

# Journal Activity #2

ON [SEPTEMBER 16, 2015](#) / BY [MURIEL](#) / IN [UNCATEGORIZED](#) / [EDIT](#)

This week you will have the opportunity to learn more about some of the technology resources we use here at the IEI. Later in the semester, you will be asked to present on a learning/teaching tool of your choice that you integrated into your class.

**After the presentation, please post a response to the following question:**

**” What teaching/learning tool or program do you find most intriguing? Why? (If you choose something not covered in the presentation, please include a link/explanation.)**

★ Like

Be the first to like this.



## PROMPT #3 – CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

# Journal Activity #3: Classroom Management

ON [OCTOBER 2, 2015](#) / BY [MURIEL](#) / IN [UNCATEGORIZED](#) / [EDIT](#)

Over the next few days you will receive your students' early feedback. This is a great opportunity to discuss classroom dynamics as well as your teaching approach with your Component Leader.

Often times, early-career teachers focus extensively on the content / lesson plan to the exclusion of monitoring classroom dynamics and use of classroom management strategies. This post asks you to reflect on both the positive experiences and the challenges with classroom management so far this semester.

**For this journal activity, please answer the following two questions:**

”

- *What is one positive experience you have had with classroom management so far (or have you observed)? How has this helped you? How has it helped the students?*

”

- *In terms of classroom management, what is one challenge you are currently facing? What strategy/strategies 1) have you tried so far, or 2) are you thinking of trying?*

## PROMPT #4 – PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

# Journal Activity #4: Professional Development

ON **OCTOBER 26, 2015** / BY **MURIEL** / IN **UNCATEGORIZED** / **EDIT**

Lange (1990:250) defined teacher development as “a process of continual intellectual, experiential, and attitude growth of teachers ... some of which is generated in preprofessional and professional in-service programs” which leads to growth both before and throughout a career.

UIUC, the MATESL program, and the IEI offer a dizzying array of professional development opportunities. Navigating these opportunities can be challenging.

### **Before Friday, please review:**

UIUC Certificate Programs: [Click here](#)

U of I Teacher Career Timeline for Graduate Students: [Click here](#).

On Friday, we will be creating your **tailored professional development timeline** for the remainder of the academic year. Think about the things you will need to do or would like to do between now and May. Following the session, I'll ask that each of you upload your drafted timeline to the website under your profile page.

### **Why go through this process?**

Goal theory finds that the mere act of writing something down makes us much more likely to accomplish a given task.

See you on Friday!

• **Muriel**

Lange, D. (1990). A blueprint for a teacher development program. In Jack C. Richards and David Nunan (eds.), *Second language teacher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 245-268.